EURO 2016 SPECIAL

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MAY 2016

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THE CRUYFF TURN!

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24 TEAMS | TACTICS | ANALYSIS

Your essential guide to France 2016

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WorldSoccer GLOBAL FOOTBALL SINCE 1960

The ultimate coverage of Euro 2016

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THE TEAMS

The definitive guide to the 24 finalists, with opinions and predictions from our global network of correspondents, plus detailed squad lists and tactics

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Iconic...Johan Cruyff

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FROM THE EDITOR

It's easy to have sympathy with people who believe the expanded 24-team European Championship is an unnecessary, bloated distortion of a perfectly good tournament. Certainly, there is a strong case for arguing that a 16-team finals – with eight teams going straight into the quarter-finals – is the ideal format. With four of the six third-placed teams at Euro 2016 qualifying for the knockout stage, there is little incentive for sides to play attacking football.

On the other hand, with debutants like Albania, Iceland and Wales, the capacity for romantic storylines is increased. Twelve years ago, Greece shocked the continent at Euro 2004; 12 years before that, in 1992, Denmark sprung a huge upset. So, maybe we are due another unexpected winner in France.

> Twelve years ago, Greece shocked us all at Euro 2004; 12 years before that, Denmark sprung a huge upset. Are we due another surprise winner?

Inevitably, injuries will wreck our predictions for the 23-man squads. But after the final squads are registered with UEFA, we will re-publish this issue as a digital update for iPad and other formats, such as Zinio.

Hopefully, the dual covers on this issue have not confused you. But we felt strongly that putting Johan Cruyff on the cover was a fitting tribute to one of the game's most influential individuals.

Gavin Hamilton, Editor

For the moments that last forever..

Art-of-football.com

EURO 2016 | SCHEDULE (all kick-offs are local time, one hour ahead of BST)

GROUP STAGE

A

JUN 10 France v Romania
(Stade de France, Saint-Denis, 9pm)

JUN 11 Albania v Switzerland
(Stade Bollaert-Delelis, Lens, 3pm)

JUN 15 Romania v Switzerland
(Parc des Princes, Paris, 6pm)

JUN 15 France v Albania
(Stade Velodrome, Marseilles, 9pm)

JUN 19 Switzerland v France
(Stade Pierre-Mauroy, Lille, 9pm)

JUN 19 Romania v Albania
(Parc Olympique Lyonnais, Lyon, 9pm)

B

JUN 11 Wales v Slovakia
(Nouveau Stade de Bordeaux, Bordeaux, 6pm)

JUN 11 England v Russia
(Stade Velodrome, Marseilles, 9pm)

JUN 15 Russia v Slovakia
(Stade Pierre-Mauroy, Lille, 3pm)

JUN 16 England v Wales
(Stade Bollaert-Delelis, Lens, 3pm)

JUN 20 Slovakia v England
(Stade Geoffroy-Guichard, Saint-Etienne, 9pm

JUN 20 Russia v Wales
(Stadium Municipal, Toulouse, 9pm)

C

JUN 12 Poland v N Ireland
(Allianz Riviera, Nice, 6pm)

JUN 12 Germany v Ukraine
(Stade Pierre-Mauroy, Lille, 9pm)

JUN 16 Ukraine v N Ireland
(Parc Olympique Lyonnais, Lyon, 6pm)

JUN 16 Germany v Poland
(Stade de France, Saint-Denis, 9pm)

JUN 21 N Ireland v Germany
(Parc des Princes, Paris, 6pm)

JUN 21 Ukraine v Poland
(Stade Velodrome, Marseilles, 6pm)

D

JUN 12 Turkey v Croatia
(Parc des Princes, Paris, 3pm)

JUN 13 Spain v Czech Rep
(Stadium Municipal, Toulouse, 3pm)

JUN 17 Czech Rep v Croatia
(Stade Geoffroy-Guichard, Saint-Etienne, 6pm)

JUN 17 Spain v Turkey
(Allianz Riviera, Nice, 9pm)

JUN 21 Croatia v Spain
(Nouveau Stade de Bordeaux, Bordeaux, 9pm)

JUN 21 Czech Rep v Turkey
(Stade Bollaert-Delelis, Lens, 9pm)

E

JUN 13 Rep Ireland v Sweden
(Stade de France, Saint-Denis, 6pm)

JUN 13 Belgium v Italy
(Parc Olympique Lyonnais, Lyon, 9pm)

JUN 17 Italy v Sweden
(Stadium Municipal, Toulouse, 3pm)

JUN 18 Belgium v Rep Ireland
(Nouveau Stade de Bordeaux, Bordeaux, 3pm)

JUN 22 Sweden v Belgium
(Allianz Riviera, Nice, 9pm)

JUN 22 Italy v Rep Ireland
(Stade Pierre-Mauroy, Lille, 9pm)

F

JUN 14 Austria v Hungary
(Nouveau Stade de Bordeaux, Bordeaux, 6pm)

JUN14 Portugal v Iceland
(Stade Geoffroy-Guichard, Saint-Etienne, 9pm)

JUN 18 Iceland v Hungary
(Stade Velodrome, Marseilles, 6pm)

JUN 18 Portugal v Austria
(Parc des Princes, Paris, 9pm)

JUN 22 Iceland v Austria
(Stade de France, Saint-Denis, 6pm)

JUN 22 Hungary v Portugal
(Parc Olympique Lyonnais, Lyon, 6pm)

ROUND OF 16

1

JUN 25
Runner-up Group A v Runner-up Group C
(Stade Geoffroy-Guichard, Saint-Etienne, 3pm)

2

JUN 25
Winner Group B v 3rd Group A / C / D
(Parc des Princes, Paris, 6pm)

3

JUN 25
Winner Group D v 3rd Group B / E / F
(Stade Bollaert-Delelis, Lens, 9pm)

4

JUN 26
Winner Group A v 3rd Group C / D / E
(Parc Olympique Lyonnais, Lyon, 3pm)

5

JUN 26
Winner Group C v 3rd Group A / B / F
(Stade Pierre-Mauroy, Lille, 6pm)

6

JUN 26
Winner Group F v Runner-up Group E
(Stadium Municipal, Toulouse, 9pm)

7

JUN 27
Winner Group E v Runner-up Group D
(Stade de France, Saint-Denis, 6pm)

8

JUN 27
Runner-up Group B v Runner-up Group F
(Allianz Riviera, Nice, 9pm)

QUARTER-FINALS

9

JUN 30 Winner Match 1 v Winner Match 3
(Stade Velodrome, Marseilles, 9pm)

10

JUL 1 Winner Match 2 v Winner Match 6
(Stade Pierre-Mauroy, Lille, 9pm)

11

JUL 2 Winner Match 5 v Winner Match 7
(Nouveau Stade de Bordeaux, Bordeaux, 9pm)

12

JUL 3 Winner Match 4 v Winner Match 8
(Stade de France, Saint-Denis, 9pm)

SEMI-FINALS

13

JUL 6 Winner Match 9 v Winner Match 10
(Parc Olympique Lyonnais, Lyon, 9pm)

14

JUL 7 Winner Match 11 v Winner Match 12
(Stade Velodrome, Marseilles, 9pm)

FINAL

Jul 10 *(Stade de France, Saint-Denis, 9pm)*

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PADDY AGNEW
is *World Soccer*'s Italy correspondent. He is based in Rome.

SAM BECKWITH
is *World Soccer*'s Czech Republic correspondent. He is based in Prague.

NICK BIDWELL
is *World Soccer*'s Germany correspondent.

JOHN CHAPMAN
is *World Soccer*'s Belgium correspondent. He is based in Brussels and edits Belgofoot.be.

SEAN CREEDON
is *World Soccer*'s Republic of Ireland correspondent. He is based in Dublin.

PETERJON CRESSWELL
covers central European football from his base in Budapest. He runs liberoguide.com.

MEHMET DEMIRCAN
is an editor at *Fanatik*, the Turkish daily sports paper. He is based in Istanbul.

VICTOR GUSEV
is *World Soccer*'s Russia correspondent. He is based in Moscow and is a commentator for ORT.

SKAPTI HALGRIMSSON
is based in Reykjavik and is a former sports editor at *Morgunbladid*.

BRIAN HOMEWOOD
covers Swiss and central European sports for *Reuters and* World Soccer from his base in Berne.

SASA IBRULJ
is a freelance journalist based in Stockholm.

HOWARD JOHNSON
is *World Soccer*'s France correspondent. He was the founding editor of Football365 website.

ROY KITSON
is *World Soccer*'s Northern Ireland correspondent. He is based in Belfast.

TOM KUNDERT
is *World Soccer*'s Portugal correspondent. He runs the portuGOAL.net website.

DARIUSZ KUROWSKI
is *World Soccer*'s Poland correspondent. He is based in Warsaw.

SID LOWE
is *World Soccer*'s Spain correspondent. He is based in Madrid.

GEZIM NUSHI
is *World Soccer*'s Albania correspondent. He is based in Tirana.

ZDRAVKO REIC
is *World Soccer*'s Croatia correspondent and a veteran writer on football in the Balkans.

EMMANUEL ROSU
is *World Soccer*'s Romania correspondent. He is based in Bucharest.

CHRIS WATHAN
is football correspondent at WalesOnline.co.uk.

OLEG ZADERNOVSKY
is *World Soccer*'s Ukraine correspondent. He is based in Kiev.

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Dream of the diaspora

Gianni De Biasi's young side draws its players from across Europe

For the first time ever, Albania will participate in the finals of a major international tournament. And for most Albanians, qualification for Euro 2016, which was clinched with a 3-0 win away to Armenia, marks the country's greatest-ever sporting achievement.

Over 50,000 Albanians, some of whom had travelled all the way from Kosovo to be there, gathered in Tirana's main square to welcome home the team after the victory in Yerevan. Prime minister Edi Rama led the celebrations.

The architect of Albania's success is without doubt Gianni De Biasi, who managed to put together a very competitive side, boosted by the addition of players from the Albanian diaspora – players either born in Albania and surrounding areas such as Kosovo, or raised in other European countries where Albanians and Kosovans fled during the civil war of the 1990s.

The Italian coach has not been afraid to blood youngsters either, often doing so to guarantee their eligibility in the face of competition from countries such as Switzerland.

> "I am convinced that the Albanian dream does not end here"
> **Albania coach Gianni De Biasi**

It is a team that does not feature any major stars but one which has proved decent enough to rival many better known European sides. In the past 18 months, Albania has beaten Portugal 1-0, drew 1-1 with France in Paris and seen off the French 1-0 at the Elbasan Arena in Tirana.

Understandably, De Biasi is hugely popular and was recently awarded Albanian citizenship.

"The Albanian passport can only further motivate me to continue on the path I am currently on," he declared. "I am convinced that the Albanian dream does not end here."

The president of the Albanian football federation, Armand Duka, also played his part in the historic qualification. He not only ensured that the team had the best training conditions, he also had a key role in what would turn out to be a crucial win over Serbia.

The "Battle of Belgrade" between Albania and Serbia was disrupted towards the end of the first half when Serbian fans, who were angered when a drone carrying a "Greater Albania" flag flew over the stadium, invaded the pitch.

At first, UEFA's disciplinary committee decided that both teams should forfeit the match by a 3-0 scoreline. But Duka appealed to the Court of Arbitration for Sport and it decided in favour of Albania, granting the team a victory which put them on the road to qualification.

Albania's opening game against Switzerland will have added spice as both teams have a considerable number of Albanian or Kosovan-born players. The Xhaka brothers are a case in point, with Taulant Xhaka for Albania facing his little brother Granit Xhaka of Switzerland.

They will face France with high hopes following their latest friendly results against the hosts, while Romania have proved difficult opponents over the years.

Albania will, however, have an additional factor in their favour this summer: the support of fans who will travel from all over Europe to back a side that has become a huge symbol of national unity.

Gezim Nushi

Change...Amir Abrashi (left) is one of those who represented Switzerland but then opted for Albania

Approval...prime minister Edi Rama greets the team on arrival home after victory in Armenia

THE VIEW FROM ALBANIA

"We have qualified for the first time in history, so we have almost reached our objective because we are among the best teams in Europe. But we must do something in France because we have all the right capabilities. We must do everything possible to please our fans. We must go even further. We do not have any pre-set objectives at the moment. The players are not under pressure, we have made it very clear to them that they must feel happy we are going to France and do their best to give a good performance."

Armand Duka, Albanian FA president

Pleased...Duka

"This is a new experience for Albania but it doesn't mean the team is going to France for a stroll. Albania now has an experienced team and its results over the past year speak for that. Albania has a lot of faith in the coach, Gianni De Biasi. The result of the first game against Switzerland will determine a lot."

Fatmir Meneri, sports journalist

"We are going to France with great hopes. We know it will be very difficult. It will not be easy because all the teams will be mobilised. But our team should make use of all the possibilities it has been presented with and play with all its heart."

Bejkush Birce, former national coach

HOW THEY LINE UP

Added help in midfield

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

When he took over, coach Gianni De Biasi tried out a 4-4-2 formation before concluding an extra man was needed in midfield.

The trio of Migjen Basha, Ledian Memushaj and Taulant Xhaka provide the solidity and discipline in central midfield. Odise Roshi provides attacking flair on the right flank, with the more disciplined Ermir Lenjani, who can also play at full-back, on the left. The midfield five operate behind a single striker, probably Sokol Cikalleshi, with Bekim Balaj or Armando Sadiku as alternatives.

Shkelzen Gashi, a prolific goalscorer for Basle in the Swiss league can play behind the main striker and gives De Biasi a more attacking 4-4-1-1 option. But he has sometimes preferred to use Gashi as an alternative to Roshi on the right – an indication of his defensive mindset.

Elseid Hysaj of Napoli is a very important player at right-back, often overlapping during counter-attacks, with Ansi Agolli less adventurous on the left.

Keeper Etrit Berisha is pushing to be first-choice at Lazio and played in all eight qualifiers, while captain and record cap-holder Lorik Cana has a strong partnership with Mergim Mavraj. Frederic Veseli, captain of the Swiss under-17 side that won the world title in 2009 was called up by De Biasi last November 2015 and could make the final cut.

The squad's wild card could be Milot Rashica, an exciting teenager who made his debut in March. He may well be included in the provisional squad, and De Biasi faces a tough decision when he picks his final 23.

Disciplined... Ermir Lenjani

SCHEDULE

MAY 29	v **Qatar** (F, Kapfenberg, Austria)
JUN 3	v **Ukraine** (F, Bergamo,Italy)
JUN 5	v **Canada** (F, Shkoder, Albania)
JUN 11	v **Switzerland** (EC, Lens, France)
JUN 15	v **France** (EC, Marseilles, France)
JUN 19	v **Romania** (EC, Lyon, France)

THE COACH

GIANNI DE BIASI (Ita)
Age 59 (16.06.56)

A midfielder for Palermo and Brescia in the 1980s before embarking on a career in coaching that saw him win promotion to Serie A with Modena and Torino, and a spell in Spain with Levante.

A second stint at Torino ended in relegation and he lasted only a few months at his final club side, Udinese.

Named as Albania coach in December 2011 and has been credited with bringing a more disciplined and tactical approach to the team's play.

DI BIASI IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"We have a flag and a people. It goes beyond borders because Albanians are everywhere with their enthusiasm and love for the motherland."

"When we started the Euro 2016 qualifiers no one had even thought about qualifying and getting to second place was just a dream."

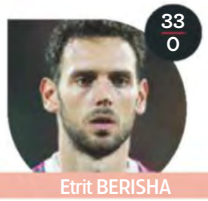
"When I became the coach of Albania, the team had a lot of relatively old and not very good players. Nevertheless I was confident that the situation could improve if we worked hard."

"The virtues of Albania? I have a very strong group of players who all like to be part of this team and would give anything for their team mates."

THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS


33 / 0

Etrit BERISHA
Lazio (Ita)
Age 27 (10.03.89)
Has also represented Kosovo. He joined Sweden's Kalmar in 2008 and Lazio in 2013.

1 / 0

Alban HOXHA
Partizani Tirana
Age 28 (23.11.87)
Captain of Partizani. Holder of an Albanian league record after going 1,084 minutes without conceding a goal.

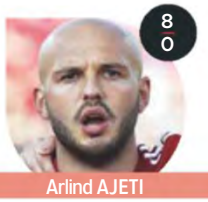
7 / 0

Orges SHEHI
Skenderbeu
Age 38 (20.09.77)
Spent his whole career in Albania, winning five titles in a row with Skenderbeu from 2011 to 2015.

DEFENDERS

59 / 2

Ansi AGOLLI
Qarabag (Aze)
Age 33 (11.10.82)
Much travelled left-back or midfielder, having played for clubs in Switzerland, Finland and Azerbaijan.


8 / 0

Arlind AJETI
Frosinone (Ita)
Age 22 (25.09.93)
Played for Switzerland up to under-21 level but switched to Albania after the abandoned match against Serbia in 2014.

4 / 0

Naser ALIJI
Basle (Swi)
Age 22 (27.12.93)
Left-back, born in Kumanova, Macedonia, to Albanian ethnic parents. A Swiss title winner with Basle.

90 / 1

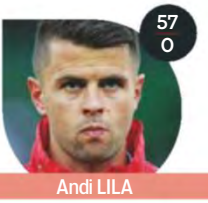
Lorik CANA
Nantes (Fra)
Age 32 (27.07.83)
First player from Kosovo to play for Albania. Raised in Switzerland, played in Turkey, Italy, England and France.

7 / 1

Berat DJIMSITI
Atalanta (Ita)
Age 23 (19.02.93)
Born in Zurich to an ethnic Albanian family from Serbia and capped at under-21 level by Switzerland.

18 / 0

Elseid HYSAJ
Napoli (Italy)
Age 22 (02.02.94)
Attacking right-back who is also comfortable on the left. Moved to Italy at 14 and joined Empoli's youth set-up.


57 / 0

Andi LILA
Giannina (Gre)
Age 30 (12.02.86)
Utility defender who has played for Albania at all levels. Back in Greece after loan spell at Italy's Parma last year.

24 / 3

Mergim MAVRAJ
Cologne (Ger)
Age 30 (09.06.86)
Born in Germany to ethnic Albanian parents from Kosovo. Promoted with Greuther Furth, but injury woes at Cologne.

2 / 1

Amir RRAHMANI
RNK Split (Cro)
Age 22 (24.02.94)
Centre-back, born in Pristina, Kosovo. Moved to Croatia in 2015. Former national under-21 captain.

MIDFIELDERS

17 / 0

Amir ABRASHI
Freiburg (Ger)
Age 26 (27.03.90)
Swiss-born and played for the Swiss at the 2012 Olympics before making his Albania debut in 2013.

17 / 3

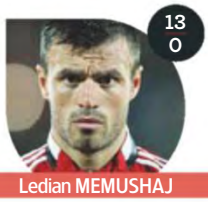
Migjen BASHA
Lucerne (Swi)
Age 29 (05.01.87)
Swiss-born and capped by their under-21s. Spent nine seasons in Italy before move to Lucerne in 2015.

17 / 2

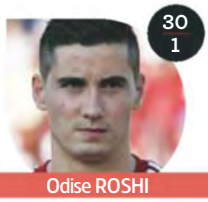
Ermir LENJANI
Rennes (Fra)
Age 26 (05.08.89)
Born in Kosovo but moved to Switzerland as a young child. Spent this season on loan at Nantes.

13 / 0

Sabien LILAJ
Skenderbeu
Age 27 (10.02.89)
Tirana-raised, back in Albania after a spell in Croatia. Won last three Albanian league titles with Skenderbeu.


13 / 0

Ledian MEMUSHAJ
Pescara (Ita)
Age 29 (07.12.86)
A key figure in Albania's midfield, he has played his whole career in Italy since he was 17.


30 / 1

Odise ROSHI
Rijeka (Cro)
Age 25 (22.05.91)
Speedy winger who has revived his career in Croatia after a spell in Germany with Cologne and FSV Frankfurt.

11 / 0

Taulant XHAKA
Basle (Swi)
Age 25 (28.03.91)
Kosovo-born, former Swiss under-21 cap and older brother of Switzerland's Granit Xhaka.

FORWARDS

14 / 1

Bekim BALAJ
Rijeka (Cro)
Age 25 (11.01.91)
Tall and strong in the air, he has already played for clubs in Turkey, Czech Republic, Poland and Croatia.

17 / 2

Sokol CIKALLESHI
Istanbul BB (Tur)
Age 25 (27.07.90)
Favoured striker of De Biaisi, who gave him a senior debut. Has played for clubs in South Korea, Croatia and Turkey.

12 / 1

Shkelzen GASHI
Colorado Rapids (USA)
Age 27 (15.07.88)
Swiss footballer of the Year in 2014 and twice league top scorer with Basle. Swiss under-21 cap.

18 / 3

Armando SADIKU
Zurich (Swi)
Age 25 (27.05.91)
Born in Albania but plays in Switzerland. Scored in the 3-0 win over Armenia that sealed Euro qualification.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

DEFENDER: Frederic Veseli (Lugano, Swi).

MIDFIELDERS: Ergys Kace (PAOK, Gre), Burim Kukeli (Zurich, Swi), Alban Meha (Konyaspor, Tur), Milot Rashica (Vitesse, Hol), Herolind Shala (Slovan Liberec, CzR).

FORWARD: Hamdi Salihi (Skenderbeu).

Alpine revival

Coach Koller has restored country's fortunes after years in the doldrums

It's been a dismal couple of decades for Austrian football. Since the 1998 World Cup they have made only one appearance at a tournament finals – when co-hosting Euro 2008 – and even then they went out in the group stage.

At club level, Austria has been conspicuous by its absence from the Champions League, while Red Bull's takeover of the former Austria Salzburg club has alienated supporters at one of the country's most traditional sides and distorted the league.

Austria's only hope of qualifying for the Euros seemed to be if the number of finalists was increased, so when UEFA announced that 24 teams would go to France rather than 16, the fans began to hope. Yet as it turned out, Austria would have qualified comfortably even if the limit of 16 had been maintained.

> "There's nobody in the team who has a bad word to say about him"
> **Marko Arnautovic on coach Marcel Koller**

Under coach Marcel Koller they stormed through the qualifiers, beating Russia 1-0 home and away, and clinching their place with a 4-1 win away to Sweden.

The transformation did not, however, come overnight.

The Austrian federation laid the foundations back in 2009 with the "Project 12" programme, which offered special training for the country's most promising players aged 15 to 21. Nine members of the current senior squad are products of that programme, including David Alaba and Aleksandar Dragovic.

Job done...celebrating victory in Sweden to clinch a finals place

Austria have also begun to emulate Switzerland by tapping into the potential offered by the country's community of second-generation immigrants.

Koller's predecessor Didi Constantini also played his part. Although criticised after falling out with several top players, he did help the process along by giving younger players a chance in the team.

However, it has all clicked into place after Koller took over following Austria's failure to qualify for Euro 2012.

The Swiss coach was initially a less than popular choice, having been out of the game for two years and sacked from his previous job, at German club Bochum. But he proved to be the right man to carry on the job and has lifted Austria from 70th in the FIFA world rankings into the top 10 during his five years in charge.

Koller has proved himself a master at team-building and getting the best out of his players, in particular Marko Arnautovic, whose career was in danger of going off the rails after a series of tantrums and off-the-field incidents.

"There's nobody in the team who has got a bad thing to say about him," says Arnautovic. "He always places his trust in me and I hope I can pay it back."

Koller has kept his team remarkably stable, fielding an unchanged line-up in the final six qualifiers and declining to experiment even in friendlies.

With most of the first XI based in the German Bundesliga or the Premier League, there is plenty of top-level experience and certainly enough to get the side into the last 16. But there are worries about a lack of practice against the big guns of international football.

Since facing Germany, and losing twice to them in the 2014 World Cup qualifiers, Austria have played only two such games: drawing 1-1 with Uruguay and performing credibly but losing 2-1 to Brazil.

With Austria not having gone beyond the group stage at a tournament since the 1982 World Cup, this would seem an ideal chance to create a new, positive impression of Austrian football.

Brian Homewood

THE VIEW FROM AUSTRIA

"It is perhaps an exaggeration to celebrate, but I think we have landed in a group where, if we play the way we are capable of, we can win all three matches."
Former Austria midfielder Herbert Prohaska, who is now a TV pundit

"Anything is possible. Iceland could be difficult as their physical game does not suit us, while Portugal is the outstanding game in my opinion. It could have been worse. If they play like they did in qualifying, then the qualification is possible."
Ernst Baumeister, Admira Wacker Modling coach

No fear...Paul Scharner

"When I played against Cristiano Ronaldo in 2008, he appeared very arrogant but now he has become a player who serves the team. I'm sure the Austria team can subdue him. We don't need to be afraid of any opponents."
Ex-Austria defender Paul Scharner

Defensive rock...Sebastian Prodl

HOW THEY LINE UP

Coach sticks to tried and tested formula

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

Koller's 4-2-3-1 formation has four basic tenets: a very high pressing game; rigid tactical discipline; slick, combination play; and twin-strategists in number ten Zlatko Junuzovic and David Alaba, who while nominally in a midfield holding role, has a lot of scope for creative enterprise. With Alaba unleashed, Austria effectively switch to a 4-1-4-1 and if they are chasing the game, Alaba definitely will be pushed much further forward. In many ways, the key midfield figure is Julian Baumgartlinger, the man to do the donkey work.

In defensive mode, Austria invariably line up in a 4-5-1 or 6-3-1, with the focus on having as many men behind the ball as possible. If opting for a solid, robust approach in central defence, Koller usually will go with Aleksandar Dragovic and Sebastian Prodl. However, Martin Hinteregger is better on the ball and tends to replace Prodl when Koller is less fearful of the opposition. Koller's core philosophy is that games are won at the back and he does not particularly enjoy rolling the dice.

On the front foot, the Austrians usually slip into an attacking trident: centre-forward Marc Janko flanked by the busy Martin Harnik and maverick Marco Arnautovic, with either Alaba or Zlatko Junuzovic taking turns to lend support. Junuzovic is the set-piece specialist, a key area in the Koller scheme of things.

Target man... Marc Janko

SCHEDULE

MAY 31	v **Malta** (F, Klagenfurt, Austria)
JUN 4	v **Holland** (F, Vienna, Austria)
JUN 14	v **Hungary** (EC, Bordeaux, France)
JUN 18	v **Portugal** (EC, Paris, France)
JUN 22	v **Iceland** (EC, Saint-Denis, France)

THE COACH

MARCEL KOLLER (SWI)
Age 55 (11.11.60)

Appointed in 2011 after a two-year sabbatical spent studying German football and has brought a high-tempo game – such as that favoured by the likes of Jurgen Klopp – to the Austrian side.

A midfielder as a player, he was capped 55 times by Switzerland and played under Roy Hodgson at Euro 96.

He coached in his homeland before leading Cologne and Bochum in Germany.

The Austrian Football Association extended his contract until 2017 in March.

KOLLER IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"I told the players that they can write history. One day, they can sit their grandchildren on their laps and tell them all about this team."

"We wanted to make this progress. Opponents will take us more seriously now. Maybe that will make things a little bit harder for us, but we are not going to change much."

"The team has potential to grow further. In the past four-and-a-half years we've built a homogeneous team which isn't at the peak of its success yet."

"I've always pointed out when something is good because that makes a player stronger. My task is convincing the players of their own strengths and making sure that they take that attitude with them on the field."

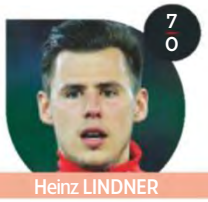
THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

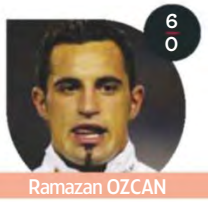
GOALKEEPERS

27
0

Robert ALMER
Austria Vienna
Age 32 (20.03.84)
Has recovered from an injury to his left knee in October that had put his Euro place into doubt.


7
0

Heinz LINDNER
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger)
Age 25 (17.07.90)
Back-up keeper for his country and now his club, following a summer move from Austria Vienna.


6
0

Ramazan OZCAN
Ingolstadt (Ger)
Age 31 (28.06.84)
Third choice. Was in Austria's squad at Euro 2008 but did not play. Also holds Turkish citizenship.

41
2

Gyorgy GARICS
Darmstadt (Ger)
Age 32 (08.03.84)
The regular right-back until displaced by Klein. Born in Hungary, he moved to Vienna as a teenager.

12
0

Martin HINTEREGGER
Red Bull Salzburg
Age 23 (07.09.92)
Centre-half who has also played in midfield. Joined Borussia Monchengladbach on loan in January.

35
0

Florian KLEIN
Stuttgart (Ger)
Age 29 (17.11.86)
Has made the right-back spot his own under Koller, despite finding himself on the bench at Stuttgart since January.

DEFENDERS

45
1

Aleksandar DRAGOVIC
Dynamo Kiev (Ukr)
Age 25 (06.03.91)
Central defender who has won titles in Switzerland and Ukraine. Born in Vienna to Serb parents.

74
1

Christian FUCHS
Leicester City (Eng)
Age 30 (07.04.86)
Left-back who played in the Champions League for four seasons with Schalke. Free-kick and throw-in specialist

56
4

Sebastian PRODL
Watford (Eng)
Age 28 (21.06.87)
Central defender who played at Euro 2008 and captained Austria to fourth place at the 2007 Under-20 World Cup.

15
0

Markus SUTTNER
Ingolstadt (Ger)
Age 29 (16.04.87)
Left-back who made his debut in 2012. Moved to Germany this term after eight seasons with Austria Vienna.

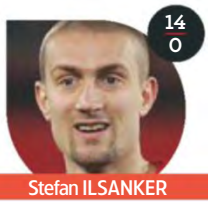
MIDFIELDERS

44
11

David ALABA
Bayern Munich (Ger)
Age 23 (24.06.92)
Austrian player of the year for the past five seasons. A Bundesliga and Champions League winner with Bayern.

43
1

Julian BAUMGARTLINGER
Mainz (Ger)
Age 28 (02.01.88)
Defensive midfielder who is strong in the tackle, but sometimes lets himself down with his crossing.


14
0

Stefan ILSANKER
RB Leipzig (Ger)
Age 27 (18.05.89)
Defensive midfielder who contemplated becoming a goalkeeper before switching to the outfield early in his career.

21
1

Jakob JANTSCHER
Lucerne (Swi)
Age 27 (08.01.89)
Able to operate on the wing or in attack, he has played for clubs in Russia, Holland and now Switzerland.

46
7

Zlatko JUNUZOVIC
Werder Bremen (Ger)
Age 28 (26.09.87)
Dead-ball specialist who is the creative heart of the midfield. Born in Bosnia and moved to Austria aged five.

4
0

Valentino LAZARO
Red Bull Salzburg
Age 20 (24.03.96)
Attacking midfield who was the youngest player to appear in the Austrian Bundesliga when he made his debut aged 16.

2
0

Alessandro SCHOPF
Schalke (Ger)
Age 22 (07.02.94)
Made his debut in March v Albania. Joined Bayern Munich as a teen but never played for the first team.

FORWARDS

50
10

Marko ARNAUTOVIC
Stoke City (Eng)
Age 27 (19.04.89)
A fiery character who had gone off the rails several times before settling down at Stoke.

56
14

Martin HARNIK
Stuttgart (Ger)
Age 29 (10.06.87)
Consistent if unspectacular goalscorer. German-born, he qualified for Austria through his father.

8
0

Lukas HINTERSEER
Ingolstadt (Ger)
Age 25 (28.03.91)
Raised in the ski resort of Kitzbuhel, he is the grandson of Ernest Hinterseer, who won an Olympic slalom gold medal.

52
26

Marc JANKO
Basle (Swi)
Age 32 (25.06.83)
Physically imposing 6ft 5in centre-forward who has been playing for Austria for a decade.

16
2

Rubin OKOTIE
Munich 1860 (Ger)
Age 28 (06.06.87)
Centre-forward whose career has been held back by moving around too much and is now in the German second tier.

16
3

Marcel SABITZER
RB Leipzig (Ger)
Age 22 (17.03.94)
Right-footed centre-forward who has been used sparingly since making his debut in 2012 against Romania.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

DEFENDERS: Emanuel Pogatetz (Union Berlin, Ger), Kevin Wimmer (Tottenham Hotspur, Eng).

MIDFIELDERS: Guido Burgstaller (Nuremberg, Ger), Andreas Ivanschitz (Seattle Sounders, USA), Veli Kavlak (Besiktas, Tur), Yasin Pehlivan (Red Bull Salzburg), Philipp Schobesberger (Rapid Vienna).

FORWARD: Karim Onisiwo (Mainz, Ger).

Riddle inside an enigma

Why do *Les Diables Rouges* consistently fail to live up to expectations?

With a number of world-class players, backed by others who are arguably among the Premier League's finest, Belgium topped FIFA's world rankings for five months earlier this year. Yet Marc Wilmots' men have yet to win a trophy and have hardly ever beaten a top team in a competitive match.

Frustratingly for their followers, Belgium have regularly failed to impress in games, while their coach is frequently accused of lacking tactical nous.

Back in 2014, ahead of the World Cup, observers looked at players such as Eden Hazard and Romelu Lukaku and asked why they didn't perform for their country as they did for their clubs. To an extent, Hazard has nullified that question, but the fact remains that Wilmots rarely elicits top performances from his charges.

The team go to the Euros on the back of seven wins in 10 qualifying games, with just one defeat, to Wales. They scored 2.4 goals per game, a figure only bettered by Poland and England. They had 207 attempts on goal, a total only beaten by Germany, and conceded just five times in 10 games, the fifth best defensive record.

Overall, then, the record of *Les Diables Rouges* (Red Devils) is useful. However, in a group where the main opposition came from Wales and Bosnia-Herzegovina, one of the top teams in the world would have been expected to remain unbeaten and to have played attractive football.

And therein lies the rub: no one ever regarded Belgium as the world's best team, not even Wilmots. Paired with Italy, Republic of Ireland and Sweden in the group stage this summer, they should qualify for the knockout phase. But what are the team's chances after that – when they could meet Germany or England in the quarter-finals?

Hopeful...Yannick Ferreira Carrasco

> Belgium have regularly failed to impress in games, while their coach is frequently accused of lacking tactical nous

Several of the squad have hardly figured for their clubs this season – including Marouane Fellaini, Dries Mertens, Divock Origi and Christian Benteke – while Vincent Kompany, Jan Vertonghen and Kevin De Bruyne have all had time out with injuries.

The fans, however, remain solidly behind the team. All the qualifying games were sold out and the shops will once again be full of *Diables Rouges* merchandise this summer.

Wilmots will have his squad for three-and-a-half weeks ahead of the tournament and he will hope that is long enough to get his players fit, rested and ready for their opening game in Bordeaux.

It must be a concern that over half of his likely squad play in the Premier League, with its constant wear and tear on players. As Wilmots said when De Bruyne was ruled out for 10 weeks in January: "It's a good time to be injured."

Belgium expect to do well, but they are realistic and will not be thinking that they can win the trophy.

John Chapman

Realistic...Belgium fans expect their team to reach the knockout stage

Expectations... Radja Nainggolan (left) and Jan Vertonghen

THE VIEW FROM BELGIUM

"Players such as Kevin De Bruyne, Thibaut Courtois and Vincent Kompany are more experienced this time around than they were at the 2014 World Cup in Brazil; the team should reach the semi-finals at least. Belgium haven't played spectacular football in the qualifiers but they haven't lost many games

Semis...Degryse

in the past few years. There is quality in every position, but the main problem is that the strikers are not scoring. The midfield doesn't create enough chances and they need a better understanding. However, Wilmots feels strikers do not have to score – if the others are doing so. Charly Musonda could be a surprise selection, he could turn out to be better than Eden Hazard."

Ex-international Marc Degryse

"If all the players return fit from their injuries, Belgium could be a potential winner but everyone would be delighted with a semi-final place. I don't see any problems in the squad. Courtois is one of the best two keepers in the world; the defence is solid; Nainggolan and Witsel are class players and creatively, we have De Bruyne and Hazard. It's Belgium's best ever team."

Philippe Albert, played at two World Cups

Best ever...Albert

"Belgians won't be satisfied unless the team reach the Final, so they are under pressure. This golden generation is said to the best in the history of Belgian football, so we must now win a trophy. However, we continue to doubt Wilmots. Can he get the best from all the talent? Is he tactically strong enough? Can he get such exceptional talents as De Bruyne and Hazard to work together?"

Jacques Sys, Foot/Voetbal magazine

HOW THEY LINE UP

End result remains a problem

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

After criticism of the team's performance at the 2014 World Cup, Marc Wilmots said in future Belgium would play more attractive football. In reality, however, little has changed, although he has introduced some new blood since Brazil, with the introduction of Radja Nainggolan, in particular, having improved the speed of the side's build-up play.

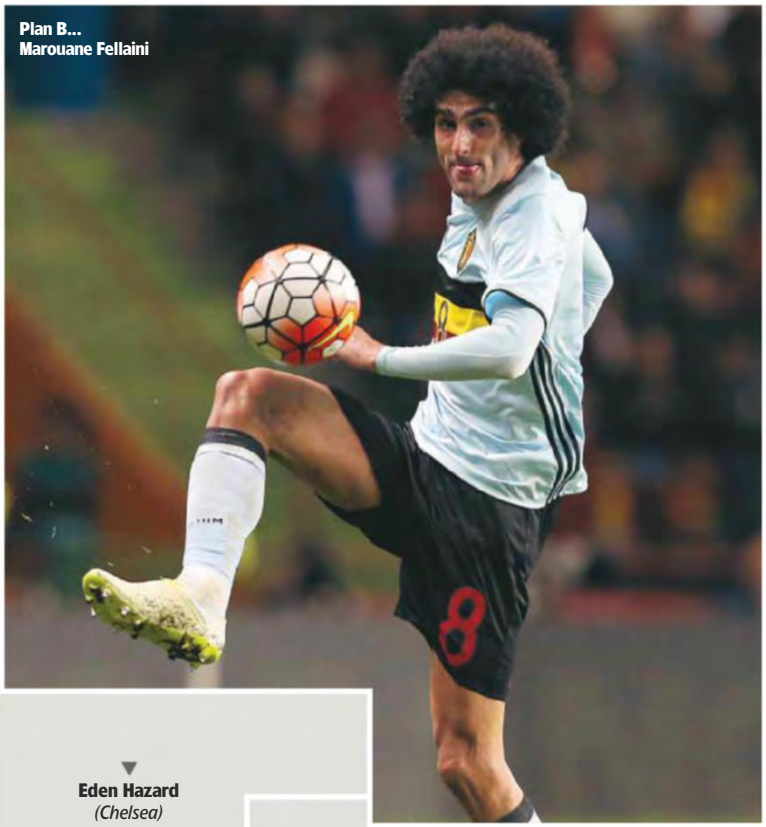
Wilmots favours a 4-2-3-1 set-up, with Axel Witsel sitting in front of the back four and Nainggolan in a more wide-ranging box-to-box role. That leaves Kevin De Bruyne, Eden Hazard and, perhaps, Yannick Ferreira Carrasco, to work behind a lone striker, probably Romelu Lukaku.

There were times when Hazard and De Bruyne were treading on each other's toes as they battled for supremacy in the creative stakes. But after various attempts to resolve the issue, Wilmots seems to have accepted that De Bruyne is the more effective in the centre.

Wilmots often finds a reason to fall back to a "Plan B", which sees Marouane Fellaini in midfield with De Bruyne being squeezed out wide. In the qualifiers, Nainggolan and Fellaini played key roles, with the latter the team's top goalscorer.

But whatever the formation, Belgium frequently fail to break down packed defences. Their build-up is often one-paced and without an end result.

It seems as though Wilmots has too many players in his squad who have not been performing regularly since big-money transfers.



Plan B... Marouane Fellaini

SCHEDULE

MAY 28
v **Switzerland** (F, Geneva, Switzerland)
JUN 1
v **Finland** (F, Brussels, Belgium)
JUN 5
v **Norway** (F, Brussels, Belgium)
JUN 13
v **Italy** (EC, Lyon, France)
JUN 18
v **Republic of Ireland** (EC, Bordeaux, France)
JUN 22
v **Sweden** (EC, Nice, France)

THE COACH

MARC WILMOTS
Age 47 (22.02.69)

Replaced Georges Leekens four years ago and blessed with a squad that was recently ranked as the most expensive in world football, but has been criticised for the team's jaded performances.

With a poor record at club level, he took Belgium to the quarter-finals at the 2014 World Cup. He is a hands-on coach who is happiest out on the pitch with the players.

Under contract until 2018, he has been linked to a move to Schalke, where he played with some distinction.

WILMOTS IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"Everybody wants to play beautiful football but that can't be at the expense of discipline and efficiency, because that's how you get results."

"Even if he doesn't play often for his club, Marouane Felllaini is the only player I'd say I would definitely take to the Euros. There is only one Fellaini in Belgium, perhaps in the world."

"The players who are having difficulties with their club learn a lot. When things are difficult, we learn. I'm not the sort of coach to cry and find excuses. I go forward with the people I have."

"I've never yet seen a manager score a goal. A manager should put in place good methods and make decisions."

THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS

34
0

Thibaut COURTOIS
Chelsea (Eng)
Age 24 (11.05.92)
One of the top five keepers in the world, has so far won a trophy in every season of his professional career.

9
0

Jean-Francois GILLET
Catania (Ita)
Age 27 (31.05.79)
Third-choice who missed the World Cup after being suspended for match-fixing in Serie A.

16
0

Simon MIGNOLET
Liverpool (Eng)
Age 28 (06.03.88)
Back-up who rarely plays. Regarded by many Liverpool supporters as a shot-stopper and little more.

5
0

Jason DENAYER
Manchester City (Eng)
Age 20 (28.06.95)
On loan at Galatasaray. Once of Anderlecht, came to prominence at Jean-Marc Guillou's footballing academy.

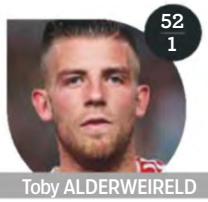
70
4

Vincent KOMPANY
Manchester City (Eng)
Age 30 (10.04.86)
The squad's undoubted leader both on and off the pitch, but plagued by injuries since the World Cup.

38
3

Nic LOMBAERTS
Zenit (Rus)
Age 31 (20.03.85)
Centre-back who struggles for pace. Known for his straight-talking, sense of humour and having a law degree.

DEFENDERS


52
1

Toby ALDERWEIRELD
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng)
Age 27 (02.03.89)
Right-back who is one of the most consistent defenders in the Premier League – where he plays at centre-back.

2
0

Dedryck BOYATA
Celtic (Sco)
Age 25 (28.11.90)
Came to prominence at Manchester City before moving to Celtic in 2015. Can fill in across the defence.

2
0

Jordan LUKAKU
Oostende
Age 21 (25.07.94)
Younger brother of Romelu, he failed to make the grade at Anderlecht. Effective going forward but unsure defensively.

51
1

Thomas VERMAELEN
Barcelona (Spa)
Age 30 (14.11.85)
Once a cult figure at Arsenal, now on the sidelines in Spain. Central defender who can fill in at full-back.

74
6

Jan VERTONGHEN
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng)
Age 29 (24.04.87)
Ever present in the league this term until a knee injury in January. Centre-back for his club, left-back for his country.

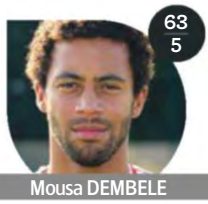
MIDFIELDERS

31
3

Nacer CHADLI
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng)
Age 26 (02.08.89)
A firm Wilmots favourite, he can play central or wide. Lacks consistency for his club and can disappear in games.

34
11

Kevin DE BRUYNE
Manchester City (Eng)
Age 24 (28.06.91)
More assists in 2015 calendar year than any other player in Europe. Has recently returned from injury.


63
5

Mousa DEMBELE
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng)
Age 28 (16.07.87)
Has had an excellent season with his club. Hard-working and creative, he's regarded as elegant – on and off the pitch.

65
15

Marouane FELLAINI
Manchester United (Eng)
Age 28 (22.11.87)
Struggled to make his mark at United. Scored 63 goals in two seasons as a defensive midfield with Anderlecht juniors.

4
0

Yannick FERREIRA CARRASCO
Atletico Madrid (Spa)
Age 22 (04.09.93)
Quick winger, known as "YFC", who came to prominence with Monaco before a big-money move to Atletico.

62
12

Eden HAZARD
Chelsea (Eng)
Age 25 (07.01.91)
Superb last season for Chelsea, his form has nose-dived. Said to be on his way to PSG or Real Madrid.

42
8

Dries MERTENS
Napoli (Ita)
Age 29 (06.05.87)
A fast, clever winger who scores and makes goals. Was discarded by Anderlecht as he was thought to be too small.

18
4

Radja NAINGGOLAN
Roma (Ita)
Age 28 (04.05.88)
Known as "Ninja", he has been Belgium's most effective player in the past six to nine months. A real box-to-box player.

64
6

Axel WITSEL
Zenit (Rus)
Age 27 (12.01.89)
Once Wilmot's trusted lieutenant on the pitch, his stock has fallen somewhat. Disciplined but lacks pace.

FORWARDS

24
6

Christian BENTEKE
Liverpool (Eng)
Age 25 (03.12.90)
After De Bruyne, the most expensive Belgian in world football. A hero at Villa, now almost a zero at Liverpool.

41
9

Romelu LUKAKU
Everton (Eng)
Age 23 (13.05.93)
Top scorer in Belgian league at 16 and prolific in the Premier League. Has rarely played well for Belgium, however.

16
3

Divock ORIGI
Liverpool (Eng)
Age 21 (18.04.95)
The son of Mike Origi, a Kenya international. Went to Brazil World Cup and able to play as a striker or winger.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

GOALKEEPER: Koen Casteels (Wolfsburg, Ger).

DEFENDERS: Bjorn Engels (Club Brugge), Guillaume Gillet (Nantes, Fra), Thomas Meunier (Club Brugge).

MIDFIELDERS: Steven Defour (Anderlecht), Thorgan Hazard (Borussia Monchengladbach, Ger), Sven Kums (Gent), Charly Musonda (Chelsea, Eng).

FORWARDS: Michy Batshuayi (Marseille, Fra), Laurent Depoitre (Gent), Kevin Mirallas (Everton, Eng).

Sacrifice...Nikola Kalinic hopes to start up front in France but could make way for an extra midfielder

THE VIEW FROM CROATIA

"Until now, everything was easy for him [Cacic]. A place for the Croatian team in the finals is logical, as it would be normal for this team with brilliant players to be placed among the top four in Europe. Now, as they say in our nation, everything is milk and honey. Let's see how he copes when the problems start. That's where I have doubt in him."

Ciro Blazevic, former national coach

Faith in Cacic

Sky's the limit after troublesome qualifying campaign

The first thing Ante Cacic did after his side had beaten Malta to secure their Euro 2016 place was to claim that the current Croatia side can match the achievements of the 1998 vintage, who finished third at the World Cup finals in France.

That might appear a bold claim, but the general feeling in Croatia is that this generation is the strongest yet. Indeed, some even believe Croatia have enough quality to be European champions.

The optimistic mood is strange given the circumstances of Cacic's appointment last September. Niko Kovac, a former international, had been dismissed in the middle of the qualifying campaign and people wondered how Cacic, a coach with no real charisma, was going to handle the big-name players.

But despite the reservations, Cacic has proved to be a successful appointment. Whereas Kovac favoured a hard-running approach, the new boss prefers creativity, with Luka Modric, Ivan Rakitic and Mateo Kovacic thriving under his tactics. Other players, meanwhile, have enjoyed the training sessions, which are less rigid and disciplined than those of Kovac.

Thriving...Luka Modric

> The feeling is that this generation is the strongest yet. Some even believe Croatia have enough quality to be European champions

Cacic managed to turn around a qualifying campaign that was in danger of failure, with victories over Bulgaria and Malta to secure second spot, behind Italy.

The coach has also been unafraid to confront difficult players. He left Dejan Lovren on the bench during March's friendly against Hungary in Budapest because he felt the Liverpool defender had not warmed up properly. And the veteran forward Ivica Olic found himself dropped from the squad despite a belief that he would be rewarded for his lengthy service (104 caps) with a place in the squad for France.

In fact, the biggest problems facing Cacic and the federation are not player-related, but concern the country's fans.

The qualifying campaign was tarnished by the behaviour of some supporters and the home qualifier against Italy, in June 2015, was held behind closed doors in Split following racist chants at the previous qualifier, against Norway in March 2015. And a Swastika symbol carved into the grass prompted UEFA to dock Croatia one point.

The recent friendly against Israel in March had to be held in Osijek – rather than either of country's two main footballing centres, Zagreb and Split – as the federation feared the wrath of fans angry at being banned from travelling to Norway and Azerbaijan during the qualifying campaign.

Federation president Davor Suker, the former international striker, has found himself under fire and the subject of offensive chants from supporters. Federation vice-president Zdravko Mamic has also been the target of sustained abuse – particularly from fans of Hajduk Split – due to the dominant position of his club Dinamo Zagreb, who have been domestic champions for the past 10 consecutive seasons and are often accused of benefitting from dubious refereeing decisions.

While none of their group opponents this summer – Turkey, Czech Republic and Spain – will hold any fear for Croatia, there is great optimism that a squad which seems much happier playing for Cacic than for Kovac could go a long way in France, possibly even further than their predecessors in 1998.

Zdravko Reic

"Cacic's greatest virtue is not to philosophise, to speak clearly and simply. Of course, Cacic knows he has football in his fingertips and I have no doubt that he's going to take the Croatian national team a long way."

Igor Stimac, former national-team captain and coach

"Cacic is not exposed in the media, he's not avoiding press. However, he doesn't pander to them. He accepts criticism, is willing to openly defend his choices, whether it's about the players or the overall tactics."

Ivo Susak, former coach of Croatia's under-21 side

No doubt...Igor Stimac

"There should be no doubt about the knowledge and ability of Cacic. He is a true professional, full of experience, and he will be able to command the stars of the Croatian national team. After all, he showed it when he clashed with undisciplined players when he was coach of Dinamo."

Josip Skoblar, ex-Yugoslavia striker

HOW THEY LINE UP

Creative midfield axis is key

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

With Luka Modric and Ivan Rakitic heading up a generation that have played together for more than four years, Croatia are full of confidence ahead of the finals.

The team's system has changed little over the years, and problems with an experimental 3-5-2 in recent friendlies will see coach Ante Cacic play with two strikers and a midfield anchored by a player shielding the back line. The role of defensive midfielder, however, has proved to be somewhat problematic.

Previous boss Niko Kovac liked to station two players in front of the back four – Modric and Rakitic – but that left both too far away from the attacking action. Since Cacic took over he has re-distributed the roles to allow the pair more creative space, although they are still expected to carry out their defensive duties. Milan Badelj is now usually the player who will sit deep.

In certain situations, striker Nikola Kalinic could be sacrificed, with Marcelo Brozovic coming into midfield and Mario Mandzukic playing up front on his own.

A big problem is the absence of regular left-back Josip Pivaric, who is out after a cruciate-ligament injury. Domagoj Vida has replaced him but he has modest qualities when going forward. It is possible that Sime Vrsaljko could step up, although he is far more effective on the right side.

Modest... Domagoj Vida

SCHEDULE

MAY 29
v **Iran** (F, Koprivnica, Croatia)
JUN 4
v **San Marino** (F, Rijeka, Croatia)
JUN 12
v **Turkey** (EC, Paris, France)
JUN 17
v **Czech Republic** (EC, Saint-Etienne, France)
JUN 21
v **Spain** (EC, Bordeaux, France)

THE COACH

ANTE CACIC
Age 62 (29.09.53)
Enjoyed a modest playing career and then trained as an electrician, running a TV-repair shop while coaching an amateur factory side. In charge of 13 clubs since 1986, some of them more than once, his only notable success was with Dinamo Zagreb, who he led to the double in 2012 before being sacked. His appointment as national coach last year was widely criticised as many felt he would be a puppet for the most powerful man in Croatian football, Zdravko Mamic.

CACIC IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"Neither Mourinho nor Tomislav Ivic, the best Croatian coach of all time, were notable players."

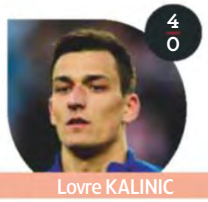
"This is the fifth time that we will appear at the European Championships. So far we have only managed to go through the group stage in 1996 and 2008, and both times we reached the quarter-finals. Now we'll do it again. In the quarter-finals strong opponents await us; if we can eliminate them I believe that we can reach the Final."

"This generation is at least expected to repeat the success from the World Cup in 1998, when we were third. I believe that France will bring us luck again and that we will share the podium."

THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

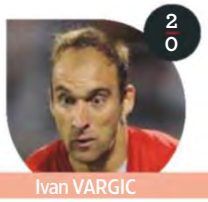
GOALKEEPERS


4
0

Lovre KALINIC
Hajduk Split
Age 26 (03.04.90)
Tall with extraordinary reflexes. Has a great career in front of him and likely to leave Hajduk soon.

19
0

Danijel SUBASIC
Monaco (Fra)
Age 32 (27.10.84)
Patiently waited for his chance, which finally came when Stipe Pletikosa stepped down. One of the best keepers in Ligue 1.

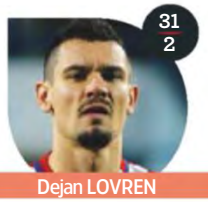

2
0

Ivan VARGIC
Rijeka
Age 29 (15.03.87)
Set to join Lazio next season and will probably get the nod ahead of Dominik Livakovic as third choice.

DEFENDERS

87
4

Vedran CORLUKA
Lokomotiv Moscow (Rus)
Age 30 (05.02.86)
Stopper, usually faultless, one of the key players in the team. Clever reader of the game and good passer.


31
2

Dejan LOVREN
Liverpool (Eng)
Age 26 (05.07.89)
Centre-back with a strong shot from distance. Could miss out after failing to warm up when an unused sub in March.

25
1

Gordon SCHILDENFELD
Dinamo Zagreb
Age 31 (18.03.85)
Not the quickest but a good reader of the game. Has been troubled by injuries and eyesight in the past.

129
21

Darijo SRNA
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr)
Age 34 (01.05.82)
Captain, right-back, free-kick expert and record cap-holder, preparing for his final tournament in France.

33
0

Ivan STRINIC
Napoli (Ita)
Age 28 (17.07.87)
Left-back candidate but not a regular with his club. Attack-minded, delivers an outstanding cross.

36
1

Domagoj VIDA
Dinamo Kiev (Ukr)
Age 27 (29.04.89)
Versatile defender who can play on either the right or left side of the back line.

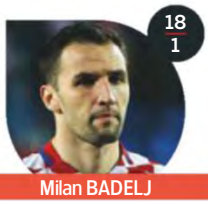
17
0

Sime VRSALJKO
Sassuolo (Ita)
Age 24 (10.01.92)
Right-back, competitive, strong runner who likes to join the attack and can deliver a good cross.

MIDFIELDERS

3
0

Domagoj ANTOLIC
Dinamo Zagreb
Age 25 (30.06.90)
Hard-running midfielder who has been key for Dinamo but is a newcomer to the national team.


18
1

Milan BADELJ
Fiorentina (Ita)
Age 27 (25.02.89)
Defensive midfielder. A strong personality and dedicated professional, but subject to injuries.

16
4

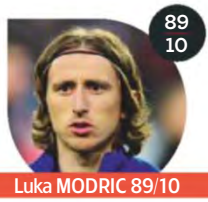
Marcelo BROZOVIC
Internazionale (Ita)
Age 24 (16.11.92)
Equally at home with attacking or defensive tasks. A good improvisor with an excellent shot.

8
0

Alen HALILOVIC
Barcelona (Spa)
Age 20 (18.06.96)
Attacking midfielder, clever dribbler on loan at Sporting Gijon. Fragile-looking but very durable.

26
1

Mateo KOVACIC
Real Madrid (Spa)
Age 22 (06.05.94)
Talented midfield controller who hasn't yet fully fulfilled his potential. A clever improvisor during games.


89
10

Luka MODRIC 89/10
Real Madrid (Spa)
Age 30 (09.09.85)
Performs the same role for club and country. Directs team play, a great dribbler and accurate shooter.

2
0

Mario PASALIC
Chelsea (Eng)
Age 21 (09.02.95)
Croatia's new great hope, on loan at Monaco. Responsible defensively, provides quality in attack, with goals.

75
10

Ivan RAKITIC
Barcelona (Spa)
Age 28 (10.03.88)
Great mix of midfield grafter and creator. Has an accurate shot and a clever provider of assists.

1
0

Marin TOMASOV
Rijeka
Age 29 (31.08.87)
Winger, the best player in the domestic league. Pacy, direct and plenty of assists. Back after a spell in Germany.

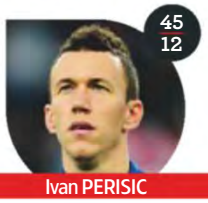
FORWARDS

27
8

Nikola KALINIC
Fiorentina (Ita)
Age 28 (05.01.88)
Good all-rounder, who is both a goalscorer and provider. A Europa League finalist with Dnipro in 2015.

65
21

Mario MANDZUKIC
Juventus (Ita)
Age 30 (21.05.86)
The team's main striker is fiery, combative and inexhaustible. Strong in the air, he is also useful in defensive tasks.


45
12

Ivan PERISIC
Internazionale (Ita)
Age 27 (02.05.89)
Attacking midfielder, quick, useful as a second striker. Can also play on the right or left. Scorer of spectacular goals.

6
0

Marco PJACA
Dinamo Zagreb
Age 21 (06.05.95)
Bright new hope, similar style to Alen Boksic. Recently broke his collarbone but is expected to be fit for finals.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

GOALKEEPER: Dominik Livakovic (Dinamo Zagreb).

DEFENDERS: Tin Jedvaj (Bayer Leverkusen, Ger), Marko Leskovic (Rijeka).

MIDFIELDERS: Ante Coric (Dinamo Zagreb), Ivan Mocinic (Rijeka), Danijel Pranjic (Panathinaikos, Gre).

FORWARDS: Duje Cop (Dinamo Zagreb), Andrej Kramaric (Leicester City, Eng).

Determined...Tomas Sivok (left)

THE VIEW FROM CZECH REPUBLIC

"The Czechs are among the Euro 2016 underdogs. They won their qualifying group, which was a great success, but I think that achievement was their limit. The squad is ageing, the team is short of reliable strikers and they didn't keep a single clean sheet during the qualifiers. I couldn't see huge progress in terms of playing good attacking football but there are

Tough...Radotinsky

No stars, no problem?

Without Arsenal's Rosicky, coach Vrba's squad will be tested to the full

Getting out of a tough group with a side lacking in star names may look like a tall order for the Czech Republic, but that's what the critics said about qualification.

With playmaker Tomas Rosicky set to miss out through injury, it's easy to write off a squad that – Petr Cech and Hertha Berlin's Vladimir Darida aside – draws so heavily on players from Europe's less glamorous clubs. However, coach Pavel Vrba's ability to turn teams into more than the sum of their parts means that the Czechs should not be underestimated.

Despite Vrba's reputation, expectations were low when qualification began. Winless in his first four friendlies and drawn in a group with Holland, Turkey and Iceland, few gave the Czechs a chance – until their opening game against the Dutch.

One minute into stoppage time, with the match seemingly headed for a 1-1 draw, Vaclav Pilar reacted fastest when Holland defender Daryl Janmaat's wayward header rebounded off his own post. His goals jump-started the campaign as Vrba's team went on to win their opening five games.

> "A worrying statistic is that the team is yet to keep a clean sheet under Vrba: a run of 19 games"

The jitters set in following a home draw with Latvia and defeat in Iceland. Trailing 1-0 at home to Kazakhstan in September, qualification seemed to be slipping away, only for substitute Milan Skoda to score two second-half goals. Three days later, qualification was clinched in Latvia.

The Czechs were well beaten by Turkey in their penultimate game but still ran out group winners by winning away to Holland.

Pressure...taking the game to Holland in Amsterdam

A more worrying statistic is that, as of March's 1-1 friendly draw in Sweden, the team is yet to keep a single clean sheet under Vrba: a run of 19 games.

And then, added to Rosicky's injury problems, there is the lack of strikers.

His two likeliest starters play for mid-table Turkish side Bursaspor (Tomas Necid) and English second-tier side Reading (Matej Vydra), and they are unlikely to strike fear into too many opponents. To compensate, Vrba will look to his dynamic midfield for goals, even if Rosicky's likely absence is a major blow.

Not since Euro 96 has a Czech coach drawn so heavily on domestic players. While that's partly through necessity – most of the current crop simply aren't good enough to attract Europe's bigger clubs – it also reflects the Czech league's growing strength. As the Czech economy develops, it's not as financially attractive for young players to move abroad.

Plzen's challenge to Sparta's traditional dominance, meanwhile, has lifted standards across the board – as witnessed by Sparta's remarkable run to the quarter-finals of the Europa League and 4-1 aggregate victory over Lazio.

The Czechs' rising star is right-back Pavel Kaderabek – formerly of Sparta and now with Hoffenheim – but several other young Spartans could shine in France, among them left-winger Ladislav Krejci and midfielder Martin Frydek.

With Spain clear Group D favourites, the Czechs should find themselves in a tight three-way battle with Croatia and Turkey.

The squad's shortcomings leave Vrba depending largely on his own coaching abilities to get out of the group. But based on previous form, you wouldn't necessarily bet against it.

Sam Beckwith

some good signs from a couple of former under-21 players. I think that the Czechs will finish fourth, but with their heads held high. They can be competitive against anybody."

Tomas Radotinsky, O2 Sport commentator

"I think the team will progress from the group even if Tomas Rosicky isn't playing. If Czech teams are good at anything, it's a siege mentality and sticking together through adversity. This may be the case in France as well. Vladimir Darida and Pavel Kaderabek are exciting players, and Petr Cech has shown that he's still one of the better goalkeepers. I can imagine a similar scenario to four years ago: they'll lose to Spain in the opening game and beat or draw with Croatia and Turkey to progress. Then they'll be eliminated either in the round of 16 or in the quarter-finals."

Michal Petrak, Sport newspaper

Siege...Michal Petrak

"The problem with the Czech team is a lack of players at top European clubs. Coach Vrba is known for attacking football but there's a question as to whether Spain or Croatia will allow that and, more importantly, where he'll find the right players for that style. Czech football doesn't currently have a striker who can score at least 18 goals a season in an above-average European league."

Jaromir Bosak, Ceska televize

HOW THEY LINE UP

Deputy needed to attack from midfield

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

Rarely straying from a 4-2-3-1 formation, Pavel Vrba favours patient build-up play. The Czechs rely on the pace and passing of their midfield to unpick opposing defences, supported by speedy wing-backs Pavel Kaderabek and David Limbersky.

Vrba's biggest headache will be finding a replacement for the frequently injured Tomas Rosicky. In the Arsenal midfielder's absence, he has tried six different players in the attacking playmaker role, with Borek Dockal and Daniel Kolar likely deputies.

Elsewhere in midfield, competition for places is fierce.

Defensive midfield duties may fall to David Pavelka, if fit, with Lukas Vacha and Lukas Marecek alternatives. The tireless Vladimir Darida is virtually guaranteed a spot in a deep-lying role.

On the right side of midfield, Jiri Skalak, Jaroslav Plasil, Martin Frydek and Dockal are possibilities, while left-footed Ladislav Krejci is the obvious choice for the left.

One of the few certainties is that Petr Cech is first-choice goalkeeper, but the back four in front of him was unsettled throughout the qualification campaign.

Kaderabek, Tomas Sivok, Michal Kadlec and Limbersky are the most likely rear guard, while Marek Suchy – who is suspended for the first game – is an alternative in central defence.

Up front, Tomas Necid looks the most likely starter but Matej Vydra's pace could be favoured for the Spain game. A run of good form could see Milan Skoda or David Lafata in with a chance.

Right side...Jiri Skalak

SCHEDULE

MAY 27
v **Malta** (F, Austria)
JUN 1
v **Russia** (F, Innsbruck, Austria)
JUN 5
v **South Korea** (F, Prague, Cz Rep)
JUN 13
v **Spain** (EC, Toulouse, France)
JUN 17
v **Croatia** (EC, Saint-Etienne, France)
JUN 21
v **Turkey** (EC, Lens, France)

THE COACH

PAVEL VRBA
Age 52 (06.12.63)

Unassuming, but with a formidable track record of success, the former centre-half led Zilina to the Slovak title in 2007 before transforming provincial also-rans Viktoria Plzen into the pre-eminent power in Czech football.

Without sacrificing the attacking football that has become his trademark, Plzen won two league titles, in 2011 and 2013, and twice reached the Champions League's group stage. He left to become national coach at the end of 2013.

VRBA IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"Maybe we don't have such famous names, but because of this we work harder to get the best result."

"Karel Bruckner is our most experienced coach. In recent times, he's done the most for Czech football. It would be a pity not to make use of his abilities and I believe that he's still got something to say."

"Coaches must set certain limits. I don't mind a bit of fun or a good laugh, but obligations must be strictly adhered to."

"I've been doing the job that I wanted to do for 30 years. I never believed that I would get so far. I thought that I would be a youth coach."

THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS

118
0

PETR CECH
Arsenal (Eng)
Age 34 (20.05.82)
Undisputed first choice and still one of the world's great keepers, despite the occasional mistake.

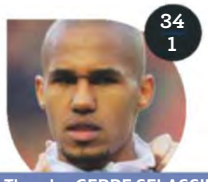
1
0

Tomas KOUBEK
Sparta Prague
Age 23 (26.08.92)
On loan at Slovan Liberec this season. Started all three group games at the Euro Under-21 Championship in 2015.

7
0

Tomas VACLIK
Basle (Swi)
Age 27 (29.03.89)
Won the double with Sparta Prague in 2014 before moving to Basle, where he won the Swiss title.

DEFENDERS


34
1

Theodor GEBRE SELASSIE
Werder Bremen (Ger)
Age 29 (24.12.86)
Right-back who has also played on the left and in midfield. First black Czech international. Ethiopian father.

15
2

Pavel KADERABEK
Hoffenheim (Ger)
Age 24 (25.04.92)
Right-wing-back who began as a wide midfielder. His fiancee, Tereza Chlebovska, won a 2012 Czech beauty pageant.

63
8

Michal KADLEC
Fenerbahce (Tur)
Age 31 (13.12.84)
Experienced central defender who can also play at left-back and is the son of Euro 96 captain Miroslav Kadlec.

35
1

David LIMBERSKY
Viktoria Plzen
Age 32 (06.10.83)
Vrba has kept faith with the left-back despite a drunk-driving controversy. Once tipped as the "new Nedved".

32
2

Daniel PUDIL
Watford (Eng)
Age 30 (27.09.85)
Much-travelled left back or left-sided midfielder who narrowly missed out on Euro 2008 and Euro 2012.

53
5

Tomas SIVOK
Bursaspor (Tur)
Age 32 (15.09.83)
Experienced central defender who can also play in midfield. Based in Turkey for almost eight years.

27
0

Marek SUCHY
Basle (Swi)
Age 28 (29.03.88)
Central defender who will be suspended for the opening game after being sent off in a qualifier against Holland.

MIDFIELDERS

34
1

Vladimir DARIDA
Hertha Berlin (Ger)
Age 25 (08.08.90)
Hard-working central midfielder whose recent form reportedly attracted interest from Real Madrid.

24
6

Borek DOCKAL
Sparta Prague
Age 27 (30.09.88)
Skilful central or right-sided midfielder who is likely to take on a key creative role in Tomas Rosicky's absence.

3
0

Martin FRYDEK
Sparta Prague
Age 24 (24.03.92)
Recently promoted from the under-21s, he is naturally left-sided but can play anywhere in midfield.

27
2

Daniel KOLAR
Viktoria Plzen
Age 30 (27.10.85)
Fast, attacking midfielder with an eye for goal. Played under Vrba at Plzen, where he won three Czech titles.

21
4

Ladislav KREJCI
Sparta Prague
Age 23 (05.07.92)
Left-sided midfielder who has a tattoo of Czech patron saint Vaclav on his arm and a four-leaf clover on his hand.

5
0

David PAVELKA
Kasimpasa (Tur)
Age 25 (18.05.91)
Left-sided or defensive midfielder who started the last four Euro qualifiers. Moved to Turkey in January.

97
6

Jaroslav PLASIL
Bordeaux (Fra)
Age 34 (05.01.82)
Played at the last three Euros and 2006 World Cup. Picked up a knee-ligament injury in February but will figure if fit.

8
0

Jiri SKALAK
Brighton & Hove Albion (Eng)
Age 24 (12.03.92)
Attacking, two-footed midfielder who joined Brighton from Mlada Boleslav in January.

10
1

Josef SURAL
Sparta Prague
Age 26 (30.05.90)
Attacking midfielder and free-kick specialist who's developed into one of the Czech league's biggest stars.

8
0

Lukas VACHA
Sparta Prague
Age 27 (13.05.89)
Defensive midfielder who joined Sparta in exchange for David Pavelka and Martin Frydek plus cash.

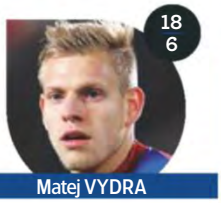
FORWARDS

37
8

David LAFATA
Sparta Prague
Age 34 (18.09.81)
Sparta's captain was originally a wide midfielder and has a phenomenal domestic scoring record.

37
9

Tomas NECID
Bursaspor (Tur)
Age 26 (13.08.89)
Tall, powerful striker who is back in form after a barren spell that began with a recurring knee-ligament injury.


18
6

Matej VYDRA
Watford (Eng)
Age 24 (01.05.92)
Blisteringly fast, he currently plays in the English Championship on loan at Reading.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

DEFENDERS: Jakub Brabec (Sparta Prague), Tomas Kalas (Chelsea, Eng), Vaclav Prochazka (Viktoria Plzen), Ondrej Zahustel (Sparta Prague).

MIDFIELDERS: Lukas Marecek (Sparta Prague), Jakub Rada (Mlada Boleslav), Tomas Rosicky (Arsenal, Eng), Tomas Soucek (Slavia Prague), Kamil Vacek (Sparta Prague).

FORWARD: Milan Skoda (Slavia Prague).

Reasons to be cheerful

Hodgson faces familiar problems but there is plenty of optimism

Roy Hodgson's England were the only team to win all 10 games in qualifying for Euro 2016 and, although they were only really tested by closest challengers Switzerland, there is optimism about their chances. They have the talent to go a long way – but there is also an awareness that things could go very wrong, very quickly, as in Brazil two years ago.

The mood is best summed up by the reaction to two recent friendlies. A 3-2 victory over world champions Germany in Berlin was celebrated as a sign of England's new potency; four days later, the reality check of a Wembley defeat by an experimental Holland side brought expectations back to more manageable levels.

Inevitably, the same old weaknesses could come back to haunt England. There are still defensive frailties and a lack of comfort on the ball – problems that are only exposed in a competitive environment against the very best opposition. Meanwhile, injuries and tiredness, thanks to the pace and intensity of the Premier League programme, will only be highlighted to the full when England enter tournament arenas in June. But for all the reasons to be fearful, there are also plenty of reasons to be cheerful.

Hodgson has packed his side with young, pacy, uninhibited players. Crucially, he has not been afraid to pick those who are in-form: Jamie Vardy and Danny Drinkwater from surprise league leaders Leicester City; Harry Kane, Eric Dier and Dele Alli from their closest challengers Tottenham Hotspur.

Most Premier League clubs have been slow to promote young talent from within their ranks, but Hodgson has benefitted from the progressive policies of Mauricio Pochettino at Spurs, where Alli has been the revelation of the season, less than a year after playing for MK Dons in the third tier of English football. Kane, too, has continued on his upward trajectory, while Dier, converted to a midfielder from a defender by Pochettino, looks set to solve one of England's traditional problems. The midfield holding role is arguably the most important position in the international game, but England have struggled to find players comfortable performing such a selfless function.

> "An England triumph is possible, given Hodgson's resources in attack and the team's unburdened youth"
>
> **Patrick Barclay, *Evening Standard* columnist**

Hodgson has gained a reputation as a conservative coach. It is a notion that he disputes, and one not borne out by recent selections.

The likes of Kane, Raheem Sterling, Danny Welbeck and Daniel Sturridge give the manager plenty of energetic, pacy options and will allow England to play on the counter-attack.

The big question ahead of the finals is how captain Wayne Rooney fits into Hodgson's template. Rooney was the key man in qualifying, during which he became England's all-time record goalscorer, but he missed the March friendlies through injury. The form of Kane and Vardy has presented Hodgson with a problem that can be solved only by leaving one of his strikers on the bench.

Attack may be England's best form of defence, given the obvious weaknesses at the back. Two of the side's likely four centre-backs, John Stones and Phil Jagielka, play for mid-table Everton, who have the fifth-worst defensive record in the Premier League. Gary Cahill has been in and out of the starting XI at Chelsea, while team-mate John Terry refuses to go back on his international retirement.

Aside from Rooney's recent injuries, there are concerns over others. Jordan Henderson is unlikely to recover from a knee injury, but Hodgson will give Arsenal's Jack Wilshere as much time as possible to recover from a fractured fibula. Left-back Luke Shaw may struggle to find match-sharpness after his long lay-off.

Overall, the mood is one of cautious optimism. England are in the second tier of countries below France, Spain and Germany. Reaching the quarter-finals is to be expected; anything further would constitute a success.

Gavin Hamilton

Optimism...the emergence of Jamie Vardy (in white) as an international striker has given England hope

Pace...Danny Welbeck is one of a number of lively young attackers who allow England to play on the counter

Youth...opportunities

THE VIEW FROM ENGLAND

"There's something about the European Championship – remember Denmark in 1992 and Greece in 2004 – that produces shocks. So an England triumph is certainly possible, given Roy Hodgson's resources in attack and the unburdened youth amid the squad"

Patrick Barclay, Evening Standard columnist

"If Roy Hodgson is adventurous, unleashing the Tottenham pair Dele Alli and Harry Kane, and the defence learn how to concentrate for 90 minutes, England should reach at least the quarter-finals. They have a good goalkeeper in Joe Hart, and some fine attacking options with Wayne Rooney's experience and Jamie Vardy's pace and hunger. But they still give the ball away cheaply and don't practise penalties sufficiently. Alli is key; if the rest respond to his fearlessness, England have a chance"

Henry Winter, The Times

Enthusiam...Jim Holden

"For the first time in several tournaments there is justified optimism about England's prospects. The enthusiasm, athleticism and talent in a new team, exemplified by Harry Kane and Dele Alli, could deliver a first semi-final in 20 years."

Jim Holden, World Soccer columnist

HOW THEY LINE UP

Rooney conundrum for new-look England

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

The role of captain Wayne Rooney is set to dominate discussion of England's tactical set-up ahead of Euro 2016. The Manchester United forward played a central role in qualifying, but in recent months has appeared increasingly marginal in Roy Hodgson's tactical template.

The manager has been keen to promote young, quick, in-form players – Harry Kane, Jamie Vardy, Dele Alli, Raheem Sterling, Danny Welbeck and Daniel Sturridge – in a counter-attacking formation. How to incorporate Rooney into that formation is the big challenge.

Rooney played a central attacking role in the 4-3-3 formation that was favoured in most of the qualifiers. That is likely to be Hodgson's default set-up in France, especially as Eric Dier has emerged in the holding-midfield role. Dier almost becomes a third centre-back, allowing the full-backs to join midfield. The 4-3-3 can provide a base for counter-attacking but also enables more midfield control.

Start... Harry Kane

SCHEDULE

MAY 22
v **Turkey** (F, Manchester, England)
MAY 27
v **Australia** (F, Sunderland, England)
JUN 2
v **Portugal** (F, London, England)
JUN 11
v **Russia** (EC, Marseilles, France)
JUN 16
v **Wales** (EC, Lens, France)
JUN 20
v **Slovakia** (EC, Saint-Etienne, France)

Kane was mostly used as a substitute in qualifying but, given his excellent club form, Hodgson must surely find him a place in the starting line-up – either in place of Rooney, or alongside him, with the older man playing wide on the right as he has done so effectively in the past.

The midfield looks set to feature Dier in the holding role, with an attacking outlook having Alli and a fit-again Jack Wilshere in front – as against France in the November friendly, when Alli and Ross Barkley played ahead of a defensive midfielder.

THE COACH

ROY HODGSON
Age 68 (09.08.47)

The son of a Croydon bus driver has been in charge of England since May 2012. He remains English football's most successful coach in European terms, having won league titles in Sweden and Denmark, and steered Switzerland to the 1994 World Cup. He has also been national coach of UAE and Finland, as well as a director of football at Internazionale. Multilingual and a lover of literature, he took unfancied Fulham to the 2010 Europa League Final before time at Liverpool and West Brom.

HODGSON IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"Wayne [Rooney], I repeat, is our captain. He has captained the team extremely well these past two years and taken us through a qualification campaign where we had complete success, 10 wins out of 10, so it doesn't please me too much when it is suggested that the moment he gets injured and doesn't play he deserves to be jettisoned in some way."

"Whenever I have had a team to take control and take the initiative, all my teams have done that, so I don't need to prove anyone wrong."

"Unfortunately, I suppose, I don't know when I got it, but I was given an epithet at one stage that will stay with me for the rest of my life: that I am conservative in some way. I can't remember who said it first, but it's not true and I have never felt that way."

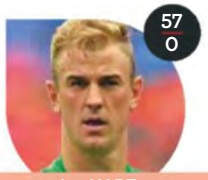
THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS

5
0

Fraser FORSTER
Southampton
Age 28 (17.03.88)
Commanding presence, he is a former Newcastle trainee who broke through at Celtic.


57
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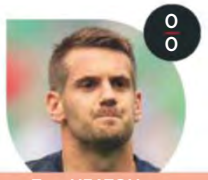
Joe HART
Manchester City
Age 29 (19.04.87)
One of the team's biggest personalities, he instils confidence in those in front of him.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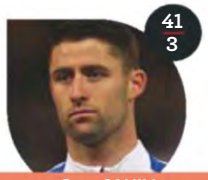
Tom HEATON
Burnley
Age 30 (15.04.86)
Former Manchester United trainee, and likely third choice now that Jack Butland is injured.

DEFENDERS


41
3

Gary CAHILL
Chelsea
Age 30 (19.12.85)
Strong in the air, good positionally, but has been in and out of the Chelsea side this season.

11
0

Nathaniel CLYNE
Liverpool
Age 25 (05.04.91)
Versatile full-back who is good when going forward but has a questionable positional sense.

39
3

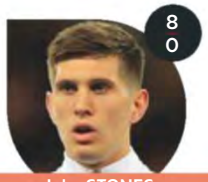
Phil JAGIELKA
Everton
Age 33 (17.08.82)
No-nonsense centre-back who started his career in midfield. Surname is from his Polish grandfather.

2
0

Danny ROSE
Tottenham Hotspur
Age 25 (02.07.90)
Recent international debutant at left-back. Likes to attack and has enjoyed a great season at club level.

23
0

Chris SMALLING
Manchester United
Age 26 (22.11.89)
Can play at centre-back or right-back. Signed by Hodgson for Fulham from non-league in 2008.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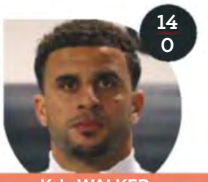
0

John STONES
Everton
Age 21 (28.05.94)
Hugely promising centre-back. Adventurous with the ball, but error-prone. Can also play at right-back.


14
0

Kyle WALKER
Tottenham Hotspur
Age 25 (28.05.90)
Right-back who makes intelligent runs. Missed the last two international tournaments through injury.

MIDFIELDERS

6
1

Dele ALLI
Tottenham Hotspur
Age 20 (11.04.96)
Had a superb season, after playing for MK Dons in the third tier a year ago. Good mix of poise and aggression.

21
2

Ross BARKLEY
Everton
Age 22 (05.12.93)
Bright all-rounder with excellent technique, good vision and tenacious tackling.

4
1

Eric DIER
Tottenham Hotspur
Age 21 (15.01.94)
Former defender who excels in the holding midfield role. Raised in Portugal with Sporting.

1
0

Danny DRINKWATER
Leicester City
Age 26 (05.03.90)
Ex-Manchester United trainee who came to the fore as a top-flight midfielder this term.

21
0

Adam LALLANA
Liverpool
Age 27 (10.05.88)
A clever ball player with good passing and dribbling ability. A firm favourite with Hodgson.

58
1

James MILNER
Liverpool
Age 30 (04.01.86)
Admired for his discipline, industry and versatility. He was a useful schoolboy cricketer.

20
2

Raheem STERLING
Manchester City
Age 21 (08.12.94)
Speedy, skiful £50m winger who is battling to make a full recovery from a groin injury.

28
2

Jack WILSHERE
Arsenal
Age 24 (01.01.92)
Comfortable in possession with good passing ability, but his career has been interrupted by injuries.

FORWARDS

10
4

Harry KANE
Tottenham Hotspur
Age 22 (28.07.93)
England's most in-form striker, who has enjoyed a mercurial rise over the past two seasons.

109
51

Wayne ROONEY
Manchester United
Age 30 (24.10.85)
Captain and England's record goalscorer, he burst onto the international scene at the Euro finals in 2004.

17
5

Daniel STURRIDGE
Liverpool
Age 26 (01.09.89)
Talented but troubled by injury and still trying to recapture his electric form of the 2013-14 season.

6
2

Jamie VARDY
Leicester City
Age 29 (11.01.87)
Livewire striker with bags of energy. Late bloomer leading Leicester's astonishing title challenge.

34
14

Danny WELBECK
Arsenal
Age 25 (26.11.90)
Quick and strong, he's equally effective playing out wide or through the centre.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

GOALKEEPER: Jack Butland (Stoke City).

DEFENDERS: Leighton Baines (Everton), Ryan Bertrand (Southampton), Luke Shaw (Manchester United).

MIDFIELDERS: Michael Carrick (Manchester United), Fabian Delph (Manchester City), Jordan Henderson (Liverpool), Ryan Mason (Tottenham Hotspur), Alex Oxlade-Chamberlain (Arsenal).

FORWARD: Theo Walcott (Arsenal).

Home truths

Les Bleus have twice won tournaments as hosts and they are favourites to do so for a third time

Bobby Robson knew a thing or two about home advantage and the former England manager hit the nail on the head when he said: "If we're sitting together in my house, who's more comfortable: you or me?" France are on home turf for Euro 2016, so that automatically gives them an advantage over the other 23 teams taking part.

Yes, the pressure of expectation is perhaps greater on the hosts, but being at home, with the sense of comfort and familiarity that brings, far outweighs any negatives. If France get off to a good start when the tournament kicks off on June 10, then being "*chez eux*" will surely help them in their bid to become European champions for a third time.

Les Bleus have made home advantage count twice before, winning the European Championship in 1984 and the World Cup in 1998. And with current coach Didier Deschamps having lifted the European trophy as a player in 2000, as well as that World Cup in 1998, they have someone in charge who's been there, done that and, yes, bought the T-shirt.

What's more, while France may not have a team that picks itself going into the tournament, they can make a serious claim to having the richest set of all-round footballing talent from which to choose of all the competing nations. When there are players like Leicester City's N'Golo Kante – a candidate for player of the season in the Premier League – and Kingsley Coman, the exciting attacker on loan at Bayern Munich from Juventus, pushing more established internationals hard for selection, then you know you're dealing with a formidable pool of talent.

Deschamps' biggest headache, once he's chosen his squad, will be deciding on his strongest starting XI and hoping his team can get into its stride quickly.

His cause will be helped by the fact that, on paper, the French are in the weakest of the six tournament groups. They start with a game against Romania in Paris, and while coach Anghel Iordanescu's side qualified for the Euros without losing, they've never won a competitive game against France. Deschamps' team then take on Albania in Marseille and finish their Group A schedule against Switzerland in Lille four days later.

Given that the winner of the group will be paired against one of the third-placed teams, it would be a fair assumption that France won't have too much trouble making it to the quarter-finals.

And at least one person thinks they have what it takes to go all the way.

Thierry Henry, a member of the team that won Euro 2000, recently commented: "I'm not just saying it because I'm French, but I back France to perform, to actually win it.

"It's not an easy one when you have a big competition at home. But we managed to win the World Cup in 1998 and Euro 84, so we've done it before.

"Yes, the tournament is in France, yes the expectations will be big. We all know what Germany can do. Spain had a bad World Cup, but they will be there or thereabouts too.

"But I think this French team is good enough. They're actually really good."

> "We're going into the tournament with the intention of winning it"
> **Didier Deschamps**

They will have to manage without striker Karim Benzema, who is not available for selection following his involvement in the Mathieu Valbuena sex-tape scandal. But with Antoine Griezmann in sparkling form, and with two of the best midfielders in Europe in the ranks in Paul Pogba and Blaise Matuidi, not to mention top-class keeper Hugo Lloris between the sticks, 2016 could just be France's year.

France's two March friendlies – a 3-2 away win against Holland and a 4-2 home victory over Russia – showed they have immense attacking pedigree. Even without Benzema they scored seven goals. But they also conceded four, with some sloppy ones among them.

Despite those defensive concerns, however, Deschamps sees much to be excited about. "We're going into the tournament with the intention of winning it," he says. "You can be humble and still have ambition, you know?"

Howard Johnson

Candidate...N'Golo Kante (no13) celebrates his first international goal, against Russia in March

Big plus...Paul Pogba is one of the best midfielders in Europe

THE VIEW FROM FRANCE

"France can get to the semi-finals. Winning the competition is more difficult, but in a one-off tournament, if preparations go well and if they have a bit of luck...well, you can't write France off. But I think the team's objective should be the semis."

Bixente Lizarazu, 1998 World Cup-winner

"Right now, I don't see France winning the tournament. It's better to be realistic than to be disappointed. They don't have enough leaders in the team. There are some big players at big clubs who can produce big matches – like Pogba and Griezmann – but that's not enough. Who's the leader of this team right now? It's Didier Deschamps – and he's the coach."

Former national boss Raymond Domenech

Realistic...Domenech

"For me, France's biggest plus is Paul Pogba. He's a very important player for the team. I wouldn't want to say that he's indispensable because I don't want to put too much pressure on him – even though he seems to cope with pressure really well – but all the same, I think he can be our driving force."

Robert Pires, consultant for TV station BeIn Sport and World Cup winner

HOW THEY LINE UP

Home advantage and a set pattern

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

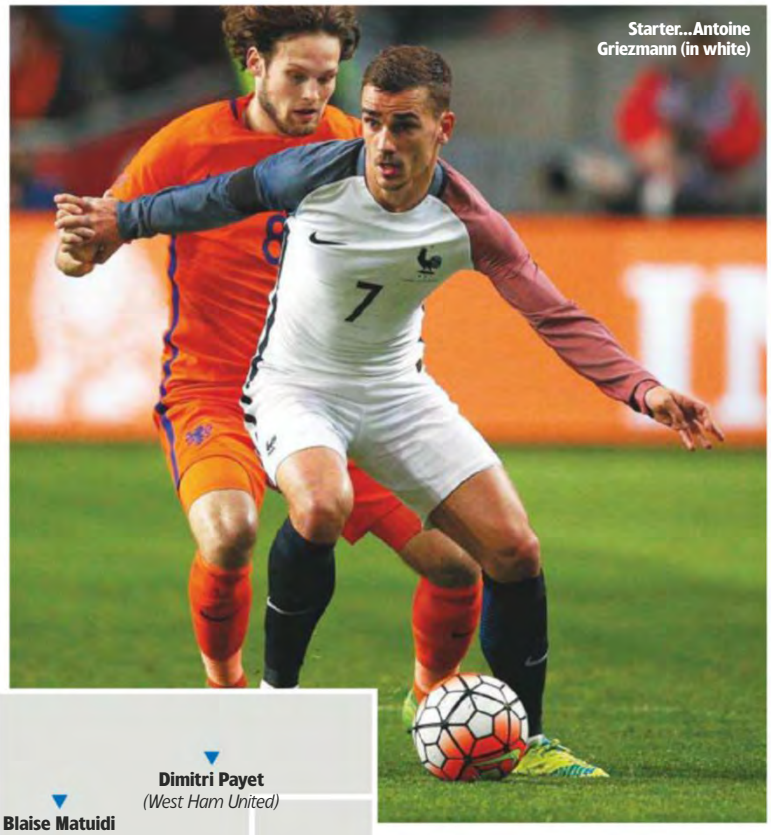
Didier Deschamps has shown a clear preference for 4-3-3 and France started seven of their 10 matches last year – as well as both friendlies in March – with this set-up.

After experimenting with a 4-2-3-1 against Albania last June, where his side were awful and lost 1-0, the coach tried a 4-4-2 against Portugal in September, but neither set-up yielded results that would suggest Deschamps could be tempted to change his philosophy permanently.

There are four players who are nailed on to start. Hugo Lloris will be in goal, and Blaise Matuidi and Paul Pogba will occupy two of the midfield berths, despite the latter not being at his absolute best this season. Both Pogba and Matuidi have great engines, and complement each other well. Pogba provides the steel and the discipline, while Matuidi offers attacking flair to support the front three.

Antoine Griezmann will start up front – and he would have been joined by Karim Benzema but for thev Real Madrid man's off-the-field troubles. Andres-Pierre Gignac will probably take his place.

Defensively things are much more fluid. Raphael Varane is a Deschamps favourite, while alongside him Laurent Koscielny will most likely get the nod, given that Eliaquim Mangala and Mamadou Sakho have had their troubles this term. At full-back the coach must go for youth or experience. Bacary Sagna and Patrice Evra aren't getting any younger, and Lucas Digne, Christophe Jallet, Layvin Kurzawa and Mathieu Debuchy are all in the running.



Starter...Antoine Griezmann (in white)

SCHEDULE

MAY 30
v Cameroon (F, Nantes, France)
JUN 4
v Scotland (F, Metz, France)
JUN 10
v Romania (EC, Saint-Denis, France)
JUN 15
v Albania (EC, Marseille, France)
JUN 19
v Switzerland (EC, Lille, France)

THE COACH

DIDIER DESCHAMPS
Age 47 (15.10.68)

Despite Eric Cantona dismissing him as a "water carrier" when *Les Bleus* won the 1998 World Cup and the 2000 Euros, France's captain on those two occasions has an impeccable footballing pedigree.

Add in two Champions League winner's medals, in 1993 with Marseille and 1996 with Juventus, and a playing CV doesn't come much better than that.

Coached Monaco, Juventus and Marseille before taking over as national coach in July 2012.

DESCHAMPS IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"In football, just like in life, you can't only have architects. You need builders as well."

"All the players have to use their talent for the benefit of the whole group. I hope it doesn't happen, but if at a certain point I have a player who goes against this principle, and because of that he might put the well-being of the group in danger, then I will be forced to take action."

"There's a large number of players I'm already certain of. I'd say there are 20 so far. I've already decided who will be there at Euro 2016, barring anything unforeseen. I want to have the ability to think ahead already, to have a Plan B, a Plan C, even."

THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS

0
0

Benoit COSTIL
Rennes
Age 28 (03.07.87)
Has made over 200 appearances for his club side and has long been seen as a top-class stopper.

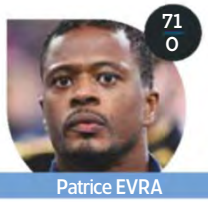
75
0

Hugo LLORIS
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng)
Age 29 (26.12.86)
Closing in on Fabien Barthez's French goalkeeper's record of 87 caps and shows no sign of letting his high standards slip.

22
0

Steve MANDANDA
Marseille
Age 31 (28.03.85)
Born in DR Congo and moved to Normandy aged two. Has three brothers who are all goalkeepers.

DEFENDERS


71
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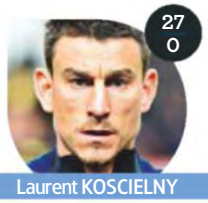
Patrice EVRA
Juventus (Ita)
Age 35 (15.05.81)
Senegal-born son of a diplomat whose fine form for Juve makes him a likely starter this summer.

11
1

Christophe JALLET
Lyon
Age 32 (31.10.83)
Solid right-back who has forced his way back into reckoning, in part due to Mathieu Debuchy's problems.


27
0

Laurent KOSCIELNY
Arsenal (Eng)
Age 30 (10.09.85)
A central defender of genuine international class, he is a fierce competitor who adds steel to any backline.

2
0

Layvin KURZAWA
Paris Saint-Germain
Age 23 (04.09.92)
Left-back whose non-stop style gives France an exciting new option. His unusual name is of Polish origin.

5
0

Jeremy MATHIEU
Barcelona (Spa)
Age 32 (29.10.83)
Not a first-choice centre-half at Barca this season. Tore the meniscus in his right knee against Russia in March.

55
0

Bacary SAGNA
Manchester City (Eng)
Age 33 (14.02.83)
Likely to end up as first choice on the right flank. No longer sports his trademark cornrow hairstyle.

28
2

Mamadou SAKHO
Liverpool (Eng)
Age 26 (13.02.90)
The central defender often seems all arms and legs, but his inelegant style is remarkably effective.

28
2

Raphael VARANE
Real Madrid (Spa)
Age 23 (25.04.93)
Talented central defender, Deschamps made him the youngest France captain, against Armenia in 2014.

MIDFIELDERS

33
0

Lassana DIARRA
Marseille
Age 31 (10.03.85)
Returned to Marseille in July 2015 after not playing for a year after a contract dispute with Lokomotiv Moscow.

2
1

N'Golo KANTE
Leicester City (Eng)
Age 25 (29.03.91)
Arrived in England last July. Has a huge appetite for work and really knows how to make a tackle.

42
7

Blaise MATUIDI
Paris Saint-Germain
Age 29 (09.04.87)
Acknowledged as the best midfielder in Ligue 1, he breaks up play and supports both defence and attack.

17
2

Dimitri PAYET
West Ham United (Eng)
Age 29 (29.03.87)
Has had a fantastic first season in England. Can both score and create goals, and takes a deadly free-kick.

29
5

Paul POGBA
Juventus (Ita)
Age 23 (15.03.93)
Mostly deployed as a box-to-box powerhouse, but also adept as a deep-lying protector or as a playmaker.

35
1

Moussa SISSOKO
Newcastle United (Eng)
Age 26 (16.08.89)
A powerful figure who shares his name with a character from French cartoon strip Aya de Yopougon.

FORWARDS

3
1

Kingsley COMAN
Juventus (Ita)
Age 19 (13.09.96)
Has already played for three huge clubs in PSG, Juve and Bayern Munich, where he's currently on a two-year loan.

24
7

Andre-Pierre GIGNAC
Tigres (Mex)
Age 30 (05.12.85)
Left Marseille for Mexico last year and is the first Frenchman playing outside of Europe to appear for the national team.

47
14

Olivier GIROUD
Arsenal (Eng)
Age 29 (30.09.86)
Despite not looking like a natural at the highest level, he has his fans in the French management team.

26
7

Antoine GRIEZMANN
Atletico Madrid (Spa)
Age 25 (21.03.91)
Has never played for a French club but is a firm favourite in his homeland thanks to his exciting style.

10
1

Alexandre LACAZETTE
Lyon
Age 25 (28.05.91)
Top scorer in Ligue 1 last season. Scored the winning goal in the 2010 Euro Under-19 Final.

8
0

Anthony MARTIAL
Manchester United (Eng)
Age 20 (05.12.95)
Strong and quick, he became the most expensive teenager ever when joining United from Monaco for £36m.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

GOALKEEPER: Alphonse Areola (Paris Saint-Germain).

DEFENDERS: Mathieu Debuchy (Arsenal, Eng), Lucas Digne (Paris Saint-Germain), Eliaquim Mangala (Manchester City, Eng), Benoit Tremoulinas (Sevilla, Spa).

MIDFIELDERS: Hatem Ben Arfa (Nice), Yohan Cabaye (Crystal Palace, Eng), Morgan Schneiderlin (Manchester United, Eng), Mathieu Valbuena (Lyon).

FORWARD: Nabil Fekir (Lyon).

Double hunters

The *Nationalmannschaft* hope to join an elite group by winning back-to-back world and European titles

Only two countries have claimed back-to-back World Cup and European Championship titles – France (1998, 2000) and Spain (2010, 2012) – and it does not require a vivid imagination to see Germany completing the same glorious double.

Hot favourites to win a fourth continental crown this summer, the *Nationalmannschaft* appear to have all bases covered: the pedigree (seven major titles in all), the talent of a golden generation of players, a platinum coach in Joachim Low, tournament know-how, first-rate federation back-up, the culture of never leaving their best fight in the gym, and always able to rise to the occasion.

For Germany's footballing finest, self-satisfaction and standing still are cardinal sins. So as soon as they had struck gold in Rio, the focus immediately turned to the next set of goals: triumph in France and a successful World Cup defence. In short, the creation of a dynasty.

That three-quarters of respondents to an opinion poll commissioned by *Kicker* magazine were confident that Germany would make at least the Euro 2016 semi-finals, it's not simply a case of blind patriotic faith. Hard-headed logic tells them they have every right to believe.

In goalkeeper Manuel Neuer, centre-back Jerome Boateng, orchestra conductor Toni Kroos and goal-hungry wanderer Thomas Muller, the Germans have a world-class backbone, are awash with brilliance in the attacking third, and arguably have even more creativity and firepower now that World Cup 2014 injury absentees Ilkay Gundogan and Marco Reus are back in business.

Another undoubted positive for the world champions is the excellence this season of Bayern Munich and Borussia Dortmund, the two most important providers of talent to the national squad.

Historically, some of (West) Germany's best XIs have been built on two-club blocks – Borussia Monchengladbach and Bayern Munich stars joining forces in the 1970s, and a mix of Borussia Dortmund and Bayern providing the platform for Germany's last European Championship success in 1996 – and a similar marriage of convenience looks distinctly possible.

Dortmund boss Thomas Tuchel and Bayern counterpart Pep Guardiola have much common ground in their tactical approach – possession, pressing and dynamism – and the resultant national team synergy could be dynamic.

> As soon as they had struck gold in Rio, the focus immediately turned to the next set of goals

Not that there can be any room for complacency. The national side made decidedly heavy weather of topping their qualifying group, losing in Poland and the Republic of Ireland, performing in fits and starts, and frequently wobbling defensively.

In the full-back positions, Germany are particularly short of top-calibre options since ex-skipper Philipp Lahm decided to call it a day after the World Cup.

Meanwhile, midfielder Sami Khedira recently caused quite a stir with his assertion that the team would have "no chance" in France if they did not considerably up their game.

Low, with typical candour, replied that he broadly agreed.

The *Bundestrainer* also has a pile of personnel problems to deal with. Back-line pillar Boateng could be undercooked after three months out with a nasty groin injury; World Cup Final match-winner Mario Gotze is seriously short of game time following an autumnal adductor muscle breakdown; Wolfsburg attacker Max Kruse has been blackballed for bad behaviour; while captain and midfield general Bastian Schweinsteiger faces a race against time to be fit.

There's nothing, though, that Low can't handle. In his five tournaments in charge, his team has not once failed to launch.

As Germans know only too well, trophies are neither won in the spring nor on the friendly circuit. Come June and July, it'll be alright on the night.

Nick Bidwell

Golden boys...with the World Cup at a fan party in Berlin after victory in Brazil

Creator...Mesut Ozil

THE VIEW FROM GERMANY

"The German team had problems here and there in qualification, but still got the job done. It's normal to have difficulties maintaining concentration when you have just won a World Cup. That said, I'm absolutely convinced that

Job done...Hitzfeld

Joachim Low and the team will be firing on all cylinders at the European Championship and will live up to the tag of favourites."
Ottmar Hitzfeld, ex Dortmund and Bayern coach

"As reigning world champions, we're favourites for the European title whether we like it or not. In comparison to 2014, I think we're a shade stronger. I'm confident we'll get to the Final at least, and then it's a question of being on form on the day and getting the rub of the green."
Former West Germany midfielder Hansi Muller

"I think we'll have a successful European Championship, though I do believe that a World Cup is much more important. For me, the Euros are the stopping-off point on the journey to a World Cup, a transitional phase when one takes stock and sees which young players have grabbed their opportunity. In today's European Championship, there are far too many teams and the quality has been diluted."
Paul Breitner, ex West Germany captain

Diluted...Paul Breitner

HOW THEY LINE UP

Modern take on 'Total Football'

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

While Joachim Low's core beliefs – attractive attacking football, good possession, technical finesse, high-tempo surges, fluidity and flexibility – are etched in stone, that does not mean he never changes course.

During his side's march to eminence at the last World Cup, he was more pragmatic than normal, rolling out a 4-3-3 system that included four central defenders and gave much greater emphasis to set-pieces and keeping it tight.

But since Germany became world champions, he has reverted to type, usually employing his favoured 4-2-3-1 in the qualifiers and encouraging more freedom of expression. His is a modern take on "Total Football", with a high defensive line; Manuel Neuer as the sweeper-keeper; advanced full-backs; luxuriant combination play, and the capacity of their advanced guard to drift, interchange and create overloads.

Following the international retirement in 2014 of prolific striker Miroslav Klose, the *Bundestrainer* often has gone down the "false nine" route, deploying either Mario Gotze, Thomas Muller or Andre Schurrle as the nominal line-leader.

Plan B would the feature a conventional centre-forward. Although Low regularly speaks about his attachment to a dominant, pro-active style of play, his side is, on the whole, far more at home as a counter-attacking force.

This season, Low has experimented with both a three-man defence and a 4-4-2 set-up although, it must be said, neither was particularly successful.

False nine... Mario Gotze

SCHEDULE

MAY 29
v Slovakia (F, Augsburg, Germany)
JUN 4
v Hungary (F, Gelsenkirchen, Germany)
JUN 12
v Ukraine (EC, Lille, France)
JUN 16
v Poland (EC, Saint-Denis, France)
JUN 21
v Northern Ireland (EC, Paris, France)

THE COACH

JOACHIM LOW
Age 56 (03.02.60)

Composed, cerebral and switched on tactically, "Jogi" was once relentlessly attacked by many in the German media for not instilling sufficient steel in his side and regularly falling at the final hurdle of major finals. He had the last laugh, though, when winning the World Cup in July 2014.

As a club coach in Germany, Austria and Turkey, he was competent rather than eye-catching, but he has been inspirational with the national team, including two seasons as Jurgen Klinsmann's assistant.

LOW IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"When the team plays well, then we have options. Nevertheless, there are a few areas – such as our behaviour in defence, our build-up play and our running patterns – which we must improve on."

"A national-team coach must not be a flag waving in the wind. I have to make decisions."

"It's the wrong approach to say we have to go back to the old German ways of running and fighting."

"It's very conceivable, of course, that at some point I will coach a club team again. Why not?"

THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS

64
0

Manuel NEUER
Bayern Munich
Age 30 (27.03.86)
Third in the 2014 Ballon d'Or, the ball-playing "sweeper-keeper" has revolutionised his position.

5
0

Marc-Andre TER STEGEN
Barcelona (Spa)
Age 24 (30.04.92)
Frustrated at being Barca's second choice and only starting Champions League and Spanish Cup games.

6
0

Ron-Robert ZIELER
Hanover
Age 27 (12.02.89)
Good technical ability, no fear coming off his line and sharp reactions. His father used to coach Lukas Podolski.

DEFENDERS

57
0

Jerome BOATENG
Bayern Munich
Age 27 (03.09.88)
Central defender who can fill in as an emergency full-back and has overcome past lapses in concentration.

5
0

Emre CAN
Liverpool (Eng)
Age 22 (12.01.94)
Despite being an authoritative presence in the Liverpool midfield, he is normally used by Joachim Low at right-back.

9
0

Matthias GINTER
Borussia Dortmund
Age 22 (19.01.94)
Began as a central defender or midfield holder, but has been starring for Dortmund this season at right-back.

12
1

Jonas HECTOR
Cologne
Age 26 (27.05.90)
Was the only player to appear in all nine of Germany's games in 2015. Rejected by Bayern Munich as a youngster.

46
4

Mats HUMMELS
Borussia Dortmund
Age 27 (16.12.88)
Outstanding in his anticipation, he rarely commits fouls and is very much in his element setting up attacks.

10
0

Shkodran MUSTAFI
Valencia (Spa)
Age 24 (17.04.92)
German-born centre-back of Albanian lineage. Rugged, resilient and apparently immune to off-days.

9
0

Antonio RUDIGER
Roma (Ita)
Age 23 (03.03.93)
Central defender or right-back. The Berlin-born son of a German father and a mother from Sierra Leone.

MIDFIELDERS

10
0

Sebastian RUDY
Hoffenheim
Age 26 (28.02.90)
While usually handed a midfield brief by his club side, Low prefers him in a right-back slot.

10
1

Karim BELLARABI
Bayer Leverkusen
Age 26 (08.04.90)
Wide man who is the Berlin-born son of a German mother and Moroccan father.

16
4

Ilkay GUNDOGAN
Borussia Dortmund
Age 25 (24.10.90)
His fine distribution, vision and dribbling skills have underpinned Dortmund's renaissance.

58
5

Sami KHEDIRA
Juventus (Ita)
Age 29 (04.04.87)
Despite a wretched run of injuries of late, the box-to-box or holding midfielder remains one of Low's favourites.

64
11

Toni KROOS
Real Madrid (Spa)
Age 26 (04.01.90)
Equally at home sitting deep or as a number 10, has tempo-changing flair and great set-piece delivery.

72
19

Mesut OZIL
Arsenal (Eng)
Age 27 (15.10.88)
Talented creator who can pull the strings centrally or out wide. A master at locating pockets of space.

127
48

Lukas PODOLSKI
Galatasaray (Tur)
Age 31 (04.06.85)
Left-sided attacking midfielder who rarely starts these days, but retains his finishing power and positive attitude.

50
20

Andre SCHURRLE
Wolfsburg
Age 25 (06.11.90)
The creator of the winning goal in the 2014 World Cup Final, he has flattered to deceive for Wolfsburg this season.

114
23

Bastian SCHWEINSTEIGER
Manchester United (Eng)
Age 31 (01.08.84)
Plagued by injuries but still has a role to play as the glue that holds the whole German operation together.

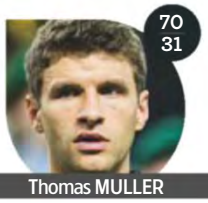
FORWARDS

62
26

Mario GOMEZ
Fiorentina (Ita)
Age 30 (10.07.85)
Old-school centre-forward who is back in the international fold. On loan at Besiktas in Turkey this term.

50
17

Mario GOTZE
Bayern Munich
Age 24 (03.06.92)
Wonderfully intuitive "false nine" or advanced midfielder. Struggled since netting the winner in the 2014 World Cup.


70
31

Thomas MULLER
Bayern Munich
Age 26 (03.09.89)
In the form of his life at the moment and is having his best-ever goalscoring season in the Bundesliga.

29
9

Marco REUS
Borussia Dortmund
Age 27 (31.05.89)
Quick, elusive and goal-hungry winger or striker who missed the World Cup with an ankle injury.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

GOALKEEPERS: Bernd Leno (Bayer Leverkusen), Kevin Trapp (Paris Saint-Germain, Fra).

DEFENDERS: Erik Durm (Borussia Dortmund), Benedikt Howedes (Schalke), Jonathan Tah (Bayer Leverkusen).

MIDFIELDERS: Julian Draxler (Wolfsburg), Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich), Christoph Kramer (Bayer Leverkusen), Julian Weigl (Borussia Dortmund).

FORWARD: Leroy Sane (Schalke).

The 30-year itch

Three decades after their last tournament appearance, Hungary are back at the top table

Out in the cold since the 1986 World Cup, the country will be at fever pitch when Hungary step out against eternal rivals Austria for their first game of Euro 2016.

Fans, players and coaches may have been watching from the sidelines since the national side shipped nine goals in three games in Mexico, but while they may lack modern-day pedigree, Bernd Storck's current squad won't be lacking when it comes to preparation.

Storck's approach is meticulous and he has already earned a contract extension until 2018. Also filling the role of national sports director, the German took over as coach from respected but club-tied Pal Dardai and set about clearing out his predecessor's part-time staff.

He then hired his own full-time coaching team, and for the Euro play-off with Norway he even saw to it that the domestic league programme was cancelled and set aside a week of intensive training.

> Storck's approach is meticulous...he has hired his own coaching team... and is not afraid to take risks

Not afraid to take risks, Storck called up untried, fiery Videoton midfielder Laszlo Kleinheisler for the two play-off games, even though the 21-year-old hadn't played any club football all season due to a contractual dispute. He then threw the debutant into the fray for the first leg in Oslo – and within 26 minutes Kleinheisler scored with an audacious snapshot before running off to hug his mentor on the bench.

Pride...Hungary supporters will get behind their team

Signed afterwards by Werder Bremen, Kleinheisler is only one of two players in Storck's squad to feature in any of Europe's top five leagues. Reserve keeper Adam Bogdan is still on Liverpool's books, but club boss Jurgen Klopp won't forget his error-prone Premier League debut for the Reds against Watford any time soon.

Meanwhile, the bulk of Storck's men are based at home or in the slightly more moneyed Polish league.

These include prolific forward Nemanja Nikolic, who averaged a goal-a-game after joining Legia Warsaw from Videoton at the start of the season but was often overlooked during the qualifying campaign. On the bench for both play-off games, he was as surprised as anyone in the capacity crowd when former Watford striker Tamas Priskin scored a screamer early in the second leg in Budapest as another surprise Storck choice came up trumps.

For much of the two games, though, Hungary were on the back foot, relying on a disciplined defensive strategy instilled by Dardai earlier in the campaign. And it was Dardai who had recalled veteran keeper Gabor Kiraly – the man whose early save changed the course of the game in Oslo.

Earning his 100th cap that night, Kiraly put in a memorable performance and then repeated it four days later. Like his long-term international team-mate Zoltan Gera, Kiraly is now back home, seeing out his career. And with years of top-level experience, both know this is their last chance on the big stage.

If Hungary have a genuine game-changer, it's Balazs Dzsudzsak. With unpredictable bursts of pace, the team captain has kept his best performances for the national side, his club career seemingly at a dead end after an unwise move from PSV in 2011. Warming the bench at Bursaspor in Turkey as often as he did in Russia, Dzsudzsak can, however, produce a run from nowhere or a wicked free-kick. His late dead-ball strike sent the home crowd happy in a recent 1-1 draw in a friendly against Croatia.

But whether he, or any of Hungary's otherwise young midfield, can produce enough chances for Storck's forwards come the summer is another matter.

Peterjon Cresswell

THE VIEW FROM HUNGARY

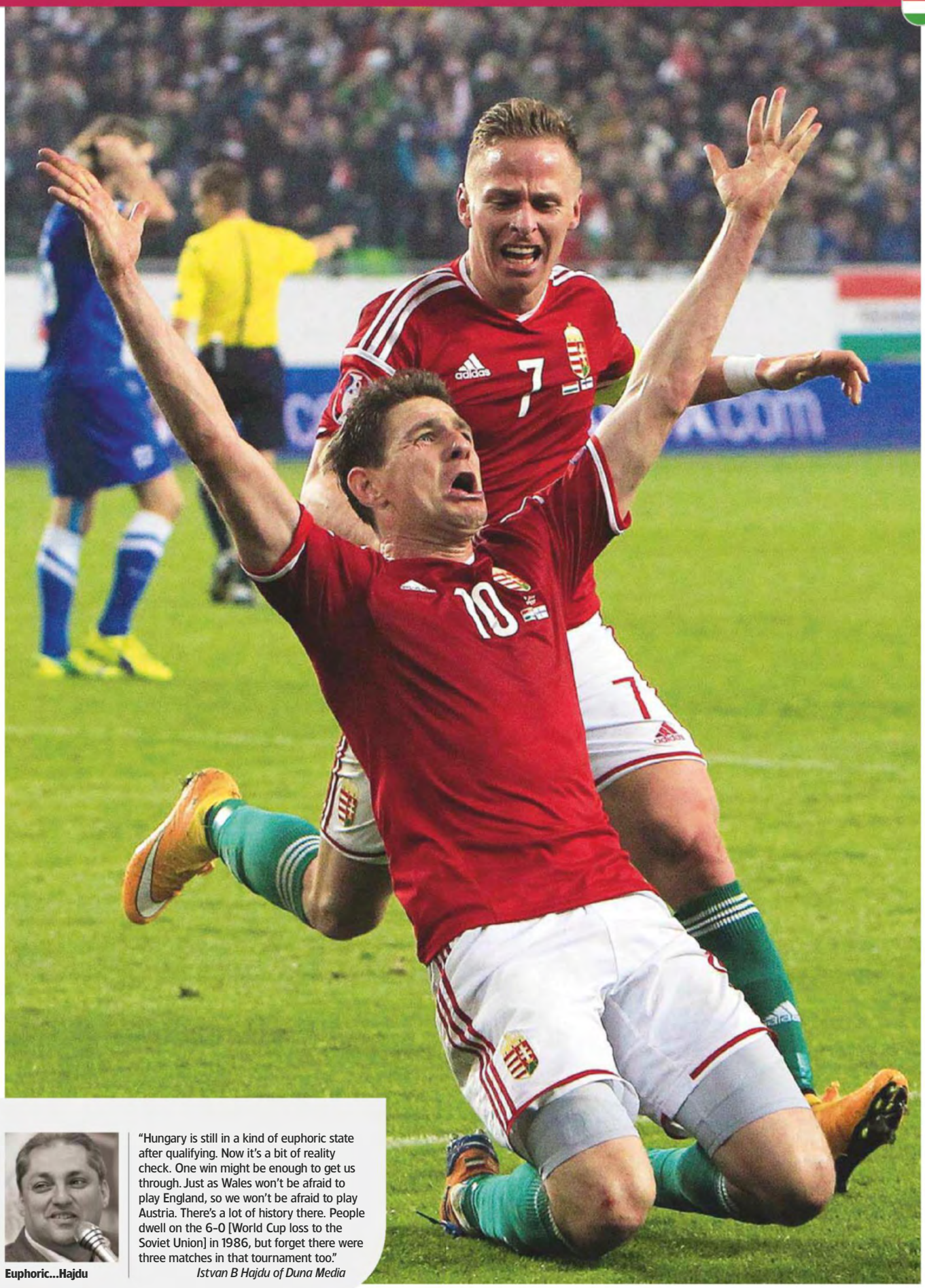
"I was always afraid that I was born in the wrong era and that we would always miss out on the major tournaments. I really can't believe that we made it. If we can play well in three vital games then we deserve to be there. If we can snatch one point I'd be proud; a win, and I'd be over the moon. So far no one is daring to speak about us actually going through."

Andras Petur, presenter Sport TV

Proud...Andras Petur

"I am quite optimistic about Hungary's chances, despite the fact our team is definitely not the strongest in its group. Portugal and Austria have a lot of players in the top European leagues and Iceland has a good team as well, but the new mentality of Hungary gives hope to me and all Hungarian fans. We will be back at a European Championship after 44 years, so it is a historic moment for us. And in the 1-1 friendly against Croatia in March the players showed great character and team spirit on and off the pitch. As I said, I am quite optimistic, so I expect that we qualify from the group with a draw against Austria and a victory against Iceland. And then we will see who can stop us..."

Daniel Hegyi, Nemzeti Sport



Euphoric...Hajdu

"Hungary is still in a kind of euphoric state after qualifying. Now it's a bit of reality check. One win might be enough to get us through. Just as Wales won't be afraid to play England, so we won't be afraid to play Austria. There's a lot of history there. People dwell on the 6-0 [World Cup loss to the Soviet Union] in 1986, but forget there were three matches in that tournament too."

Istvan B Hajdu of Duna Media

Experienced...Zoltan Gera (no10) celebrates his goal against Finland in November

HOW THEY LINE UP

Solid at the back, still to be decided up front

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

Bernd Storck's predecessor, Pal Dardai, installed a tight back four that served Hungary well for the second half of their qualifying campaign.

Keeper Gabor Kiraly is quick off his line, spreading confidence around the defence, but whether Adam Bogdan or Denes Dibusz would do likewise, if selected, is another matter.

Storck prefers a five-man midfield, with two playing behind three. Zoltan Gera is either the lynchpin in the forward three behind the target man or, given his 37 years, sits back beside Adam Nagy.

From the right flank, Balazs Dzsudzsak uses this left foot to best effect, cutting in quickly and delivering curling, penetrating crosses at speed. Most free-kicks around the box are his domain, although Gera also hovers. Dzsudzsak takes his captain's role seriously, endlessly encouraging, cajoling, leading by example. Veterans Kiraly and Gera also have a positive effect on a side whose average age has been reduced by Nagy and Laszlo Kleinheisler.

Either deployed on the left of the midfield five or, as was seen in Hungary's recent friendly with Croatia, Kleinheisler can play behind the solitary striker.

Up front, Storck has plenty of options. On paper, the most obvious choice would be Nemanja Nikolic, one of the top scorers in Europe this season, but Tamas Priskin and Adam Szalai both have a chance.

Scorer of vital goals in qualifying, Daniel Bode is used as an impact sub for the last quarter of a game.

Confidence... Gabor Kiraly

SCHEDULE

MAY 20
v Ivory Coast (F, Budapest, Hungary)
JUN 4
v Germany (F, Gelsenkirchen, Germany)
JUN 14
v Austria (EC, Bordeaux, France)
JUN 18
v Iceland (EC, Marseilles, France)
JUN 22
v Portugal (EC, Lyon, France)

THE COACH

BERND STORCK (Ger)
Age 53 (25.01.63)

After ending his playing career as a German Cup winner with Borussia Dortmund in 1989, he became the long-term assistant to coach Jurgen Rober at Hertha Berlin. And he was the one who would later persuade Rober to sign a young Pal Dardai – the man he would succeed as Hungary boss in 2015. After striking out on his own in Kazakhstan, he has worked mostly with youth teams during his career, including Hungary's at last summer's Under-20 World Cup.

STORCK IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"In Germany, we say that if the player is good enough, he's old enough. Age doesn't matter."

"These young Hungarian players can prove to the world how good they are. They won't have a better opportunity."

"The players deserved to qualify. They worked so hard to achieve it."

"I see this as the perfect opportunity to take Hungarian football in a new direction."

"We have a lot of players who don't play very often in their clubs. I told them to play without fear and you will have success."

THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS

20
0

Adam BOGDAN
Liverpool (Eng)
Age 28 (27.09.87)
From hero at Bolton to patsy at Liverpool, although he did save three penalties against Carlisle this term.

4
0

Denes DIBUSZ
Ferencvaros
Age 25 (16.11.90)
A recent addition to the national side. Wears his lucky number 90 for his club side – the year he was born.

101
0

Gabor KIRALY
Szombathelyi Haladas
Age 40 (01.04.76)
Hungary's most-capped player ever is set to become the oldest person to appear in the Euro finals.

DEFENDERS

13
0

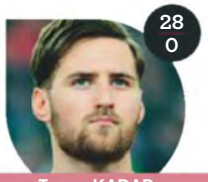
Attila FIOLA
Puskas Akademia
Age 26 (17.02.90)
Right-back whose club are based in the hamlet of Felcsut, where prime minister Viktor Orban went to school.

13
1

Richard GUZMICS
Wisla Krakow (Pol)
Age 28 (16.04.87)
Centre-back who revived his international career with solid performances in the play-offs with Norway.

90
6

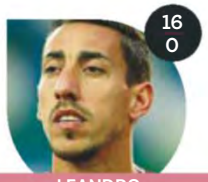
Roland JUHASZ
Videoton
Age 32 (01.07.83)
A four-time Belgian champion with Anderlecht, he has bags of experience but can be caught out for pace.


28
0

Tamas KADAR
Lech Poznan (Pol)
Age 26 (14.03.90)
Known as "Bad Boy" after Jesse Pinkman in the TV series Breaking Bad. Five years a reserve at Newcastle United.

9
0

Adam LANG
Videoton
Age 23 (17.01.93)
Shows maturity beyond his years. Was a member of the Gyor squad that were league champions in 2013.


16
0

LEANDRO
Ferencvaros
Age 34 (19.03.82)
Brazilian-born left-sided player who is back in the national picture after returning to Ferencvaros last year.

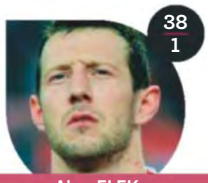
79
4

Vilmos VANCZAK
Sion (Swi)
Age 32 (20.06.83)
Versatile operator who made his top-flight debut for his hometown club Diosgyor when only 15.

MIDFIELDERS

76
18

Balazs DZSUDZSAK
Bursaspor (Tur)
Age 29 (23.12.86)
Hungary's captain comes to life in a national shirt, making dangerous runs from the right flank.


38
1

Akos ELEK
Diosgyor
Age 27 (21.07.88)
Now a regular after being a bit player in the pre-Dardai days. Made his debut in a 6-1 loss to Holland in 2010.

87
24

Zoltan GERA
Ferencvaros
Age 37 (22.04.79)
Played for West Brom and Fulham. Won the league this season – 12 years after his last winner's medal.

3
1

Laszlo KLEINHEISLER
Werder Bremen (Ger)
Age 22 (08.04.94)
The real success story of the qualifiers. A goalscoring debut in the play-offs earned him a contract with Bremen.

6
0

Adam NAGY
Ferencvaros
Age 20 (17.06.95)
Two-footed, he had only played his first 90 minutes of top-flight football a month before his first cap.

19
0

Adam PINTER
Ferencvaros
Age 27 (12.06.88)
On the fringes while struggling in Russia and Greece, but now back in the frame thanks to a title-winning season.

11
2

Zoltan STIEBER
Hamburg (Ger)
Age 27 (16.10.88)
Started with Aston Villa but has struggled to establish himself. Currently on loan at Nuremberg.

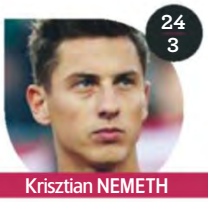
FORWARDS

11
4

Daniel BODE
Ferencvaros
Age 29 (24.10.86)
Bullish forward who is a fans' favourite at Ferencvaros and has a knack of scoring vital goals for the national team.

11
1

Gergo LOVRENCSICS
Lech Poznan (Pol)
Age 27 (01.09.88)
A Polish title winner last year, his selfless right-sided running was a vital factor in Hungary's play-off success.


24
3

Krisztian NEMETH
Al Gharafa (Qat)
Age 27 (05.01.89)
Moved to Qatar from the USA in January. Helped Hungary to third place at the 2009 Under-20 World Cup.

17
3

Nemanja NIKOLIC
Legia Warsaw (Pol)
Age 28 (31.12.87)
In-form but not a regular. Born in northern Serbia, he first played for Barcs, on the Hungary-Croatia border.

55
17

Tamas PRISKIN
Slovan Bratislava (Slk)
Age 29 (27.09.86)
Scored in the play-offs and has found the net for six British clubs, including Watford, QPR and Swansea City.

30
8

Adam SZALAI
Hoffenheim (Ger)
Age 28 (09.12.87)
Recalled to the fold by previous coach Pal Dardai. Joined Hanover on loan in January.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

GOALKEEPER: Peter Gulacsi (RB Leipzig, Ger).

DEFENDERS: Barnabas Bese (MTK), Mihaly Korhut (Debrecen).

MIDFIELDERS: Adam Bodi (Debrecen), Adam Gyurcso (Pogon Szczecin, Pol), Roland Sallai (Puskas Akademia), Daniel Tozser (QPR, Eng).

FORWARD: Laszlo Pekar (Puskas Akademia).

Versatile...midfielder Emil Hallfredsson played seven games in Iceland's historic qualifying campaign

THE VIEW FROM ICELAND

"The Icelandic squad has more quality and depth than ever before and some of the players are able to perform at a level other teams may find hard to stop. A fantastic team spirit characterises the team, and a very strong will to do well. The one responsible for activating these forces is Lars Lagerback, a man with great experience, who also has built a team behind the team; the Icelandic FA deserves much

Spirit...Thordarson

Small nation, big hearts

Football has, literally, come in from the cold in Europe's northern outpost

With a population of around 330,000 people, Iceland will be by far the smallest country ever to compete in the European Championship finals.

Drawn in a qualifying group with Holland, Czech Republic and Turkey, few gave them any chance of making it to France. But the players and coaching staff from the tiny nation in the North Atlantic had other ideas.

In October 2013, in the dressing room immediately after their loss to Croatia in a World Cup play-off, the team decided that the only way for their football-crazy country to cope with the disappointment would be to go to France in 2016.

And while that may have seemed an ambitious plan, three wins in the first three group games – Turkey at home, Latvia away and Holland at home – scoring eight times without conceding a single goal, filled everyone with confidence.

Building on that solid foundation, they marched on with a club-like team spirit. Well organised and defending as a unit, they won six of their first seven games, with the only loss being away to the Czechs. An incredible 1-0 victory over Holland in Amsterdam made everyone realise that the Euros were within reach.

There have probably never been such joyous celebrations after a dull, goalless draw as when Kazakhstan visited the Laugardalsvollur stadium in Reykjavík on September 6. With two games still to be played, Iceland clinched their place in France with that precious point.

For decades, football was really only a five-month summer sport in Iceland. During the long cold winters, teams practised but facilities were poor. They played in small halls meant for indoor sports, and on gravel pitches outside, usually covered with snow for long periods. Wind and snowstorms did not help during the seven months of pre-season.

Together...it's all about the power of the collective for Iceland

In the early 2000s, the Icelandic FA and local communities began a project to improve facilities. There are now seven full-size indoor pitches in Iceland and a further 20 full-size artificial grass pitches outdoors around the country. In addition, most schools now have a small artificial football pitch. Footballers of all ages, boys and girls, are able to practise in decent conditions all year round.

The development of young players, severely restricted over the years because of that lack of facilities, has changed dramatically. In the past, Icelandic footballers were known to be powerful but, with a few notable exceptions, lacked technical ability. Today's youngsters have better technique while still retaining the traditional mental strength and power of their predecessors.

The most important players today are midfielders Gylfi Sigurdsson and Aron Gunnarsson. Both played at the Under-21 European Championship in Denmark in 2011 – when Iceland first qualified for that tournament – along with their team-mates in midfield Johann Gudmundsson and Birkir Bjarnason, and forwards Kolbeinn Sigthorsson and Alfred Finnbogason.

Discipline and organisation were two of the main things Lars Lagerback focused on after taking over the senior side in 2011. Former coach Olafur Johannesson had put many youngsters in the team and, although results were not favourable, they gained valuable experience and were well equipped for a step to the next level when the Swede arrived on the scene.

Skapti Hallgrimsson

praise for the job they have done. If the boys play to their best, Iceland can be a big surprise in France."

Former national coach Gudjon Thordarson

"Something tells me there is every reason to be optimistic and that Iceland will qualify from the group. The other three teams are good, of course, but Iceland is lucky to play Portugal first as all the attention will be on the opposition, especially one player. Cristiano Ronaldo is fantastic, but because of his brilliance Portugal sometimes is not too good a 'team'. I think Austria will be the toughest opponent. For Iceland, everything depends on whether Gylfi Sigurdsson, playmaker and main goalscorer, is fit and in good shape. A superb player, he always leads by example, by his work rate, and makes the players around him better."

Gudmundur Benediktsson, former footballer and host of TV Sport on Channel 2

"Iceland has a unique group of players in our history and this golden generation can perform in France. Everything depends on how Gylfi Sigurdsson will do, but the others are not bad! Another midfielder, Birkir Bjarnason, has progressed so much lately and will be valuable, and something tells me Eidur Gudjohnsen will play quite a part. Iceland today resembles Leicester City in a way: a bunch of not the very best players in the world, but together they form a fantastic team with a winning mentality."

Team...Gunnlaugsson

Arnar Gunnlaugsson, pundit on TV Sport on Channel 2

HOW THEY LINE UP

Patient and more comfortable on the ball

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

SCHEDULE

JUN 1
v **Norway**
(F, Oslo, Norway)

JUN 6
v **Liechtenstein**
(F, Reykjavik, Iceland)

JUN 14
v **Portugal**
(EC, Saint-Etienne, France)

JUN 18
v **Hungary**
(EC, Marseilles, France)

JUN 22
v **Austria**
(EC, Saint-Denis, France)

Since Lars Lagerback took over as coach in October 2011 he has stuck to the 4-4-2 system that he favoured for so many years with his native Sweden. With his current team, the emphasis has very much been on cohesion and team spirit, both in defence and attack.

Through the years, Iceland has produced some good footballers, and a few excellent ones, but the depth in quality now is better than ever. For the first time, everybody in the team – or in the squad for that matter – is comfortable with keeping the ball and waiting patiently for the right time to attack with speed and power.

The old saying that "a chain is never stronger than its weakest link" is acknowledged by everybody on the team. They all accept that each of them has to give 100 per cent, every game; 95 per cent for a side like Iceland is not enough on the big stage. No one is too big for the team. A very good example of that is star midfielder Gylfi Sigurdsson, who was top goalscorer in qualifying with six, but is also one of the best defenders in the team with a fantastic work rate.

Sigurdsson and Aron Gunnarsson have played major roles under Lagerback, as well as fellow midfielders Birkir Bjarnason and Johann Gudmundsson, and striker Kolbeinn Sigthorsson, who is certain to lead the line in France even though he has not scored regularly at club level this season. However, his ratio with the national team is a goal every other match. Sigurdsson suffered a dip in form for the first half of the season, but has stepped up a gear lately, while Bjarnason has been doing well for Basle in Switzerland.

There is some concern around captain Gunnarsson, who was fantastic during the qualifiers but has not been a regular for Cardiff City, while first-choice goalkeeper Hannes Halldorsson missed the last game of the qualifying group after dislocating a shoulder in training and has only recently begun playing again, on loan at Bodo/Glimt in Norway from NEC in Holland.

Other important players are the central defensive pair of Ragnar Sigurdsson and Kari Arnason, who were instrumental in Iceland only conceding six goals in their 10 qualifying group matches.

Iceland have not done well in friendlies this year, but they will recover their touch before the action starts in June. The return to the national team of Eidur Gudjohnsen last year was a major boost for the squad. At 37, the former Chelsea and Barcelona star still has a lot to offer, both on and off the field.

Formation wise, there has not really been a plan B in recent years. However, if the opposition play five in midfield, rather than put in an extra midfielder and change to 4-5-1 or even 3-5-2, Iceland will ensure that one or both attackers track back even more than usual, and that the full-backs and midfielders work together to stifle the opposition.

Integral...midfielder Birkir Bjarnason

THE COACHES

LARS LAGERBACK (Swe)
Age 67 (16.07.48)

In charge since October 2011. As assistant, head coach and joint head-coach, he took Sweden to five consecutive Euros and World Cups between 2000 and 2008. He resigned after failing to reach the 2010 World Cup. Disciplined, organised and extremely focused on every detail. His contract is up after France.

HEIMIR HALLGRIMSSON
Age 49 (10.06.67)

Hired as assistant coach when Lagerback was appointed in 2011, they struck up a very good partnership and he became joint-coach two years later. A qualified dentist, he often meets up with supporters in a pub close to the stadium and discusses tactics. Has a contract until 2018 and is expected to succeed his mentor at some point.

LAGERBACK IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"I wouldn't say that I am a hero. Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and people like that are real heroes."

"It was big to qualify with Sweden, but this is special. People are proud here and you can feel that proudness."

HALLGRIMSSON IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"I would give the credit to the youth coaches in Iceland. They are probably among the best in the world."

"I can't wait to get to France, but that's not the end of the road. Success is a journey, not a destination."

THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS

26
0

Gunnleifur GUNNLEIFSSON
Breidablik
Age 40 (14.07.75)
Has spent his career in Iceland, apart from a short spell in Switzerland. Only figured in friendlies lately.

32
0

Hannes HALLDORSSON
NEC (Hol)
Age 32 (27.04.84)
Number one for the past four years. Worked as a film director and only became a professional player in 2014.

10
0

Ogmundur KRISTINSSON
Hammarby (Swe)
Age 26 (19.06.89)
Not part of the squad for the first three qualifiers. Played the last, v Turkey, because of injury to Halldorsson.

DEFENDERS

47
2

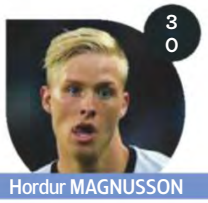
Kari ARNASON
Malmo (Swe)
Age 33 (13.10.82)
Strong in the air, with good positional sense. Forms a solid partnership in the heart of defence with Sigurdsson.

6
0

Haukur HEIDAR HAUKSSON
AIK (Swe)
Age 24 (01.09.91)
Broke into the squad last year. Strong and solid, he is a good crosser of the ball when given the chance to go forward.

2
0

Hjortur HERMANNSSON
PSV (Hol)
Age 21 (08.02.95)
A strong central defender who captained the under-17s and under-19s. On loan at Gothenburg in Sweden.


3
0

Hordur MAGNUSSON
Juventus (Ita)
Age 23 (11.02.93)
Left-back who loves to attack. On loan at Cesena, he has only recently broken into the national senior squad.

28
0

Solvi OTTESEN
Wuhan Zall (Chn)
Age 32 (18.02.84)
Has appeared mainly as a sub since Ragnar Sigurdsson and Arnason came together in the centre of defence.

56
0

Birkir SAEVARSSON
Hammarby (Swe)
Age 31 (11.11.84)
Quick right-back who can also play in the centre and midfield. Spent seven seasons with Brann in Norway.

54
1

Ragnar SIGURDSSON
Krasnodar (Rus)
Age 29 (19.06.86)
Reliable centre-back who played every minute of the qualifying phase and is a good reader of the game.

37
0

Ari SKULASON
OB (Den)
Age 29 (14.05.87)
A former winger, he plays as an attacking left-back for the national side, but in defensive midfield for his club.

MIDFIELDERS

46
6

Birkir BJARNASON
Basle (Swi)
Age 28 (27.05.88)
A hard-working, versatile midfielder with an eye for goal. Calm, strong and comfortable on the ball.

25
0

Elmar BJARNASON
AGF (Den)
Age 29 (04.03.87)
Started the campaign as first-choice right-back but now has to settle for a role as midfield back-up.

84
25

Eidur GUDJOHNSEN
Molde (Nor)
Age 37 (15.09.78)
The former Chelsea and Barcelona star no longer plays a big part, but is influential when coming off the bench.

45
5

Johann GUDMUNDSSON
Charlton Athletic (Eng)
Age 25 (27.10.90)
A quick and skilful midfielder or winger with a great left foot, he scored a hat-trick against Switzerland in 2013.

57
2

Aron GUNNARSSON
Cardiff City (Eng)
Age 27 (22.04.89)
Hard working and reliable, a defensive midfielder who holds the side together. An excellent handball player when younger.

52
1

Emil HALLFREDSSON
Udinese (Ita)
Age 31 (29.06.84)
The left-footed midfielder can play on either flank, or in the centre if Gylfi Sigurdsson is moved further forward.

37
12

Gylfi SIGURDSSON
Swansea City (Eng)
Age 26 (08.09.89)
Set-piece specialist with great long-range shooting ability. A team player, he also works hard on his defensive duties.

6
3

Arnor TRAUSTASON
Norrkoping (Swe)
Age 23 (30.04.93)
A skilful attacking midfielder who played a prominent part in his club's march to the Swedish title last year.

FORWARDS

20
1

Jon Dadi BODVARSSON
Kaiserslautern (Ger)
Age 24 (25.05.92)
Surprisingly started the first Euro qualifier at home to Turkey and scored after only 18 minutes.

33
7

Alfred FINNBOGASON
Real Sociedad (Spa)
Age 27 (01.02.89)
Skilful with an eye for goal, he scored 53 in 65 games for Dutch side Heerenveen. Currently on loan at Augsburg.

9
1

Vidar Orn KJARTANSSON
Malmo (Swe)
Age 26 (11.03.90)
Played in China for a year with Jiangsu Guoxin-Sainty before being brought back to Europe by Malmo in January 2016.

38
19

Kolbeinn SIGTHORSSON
Nantes (Fra)
Age 26 (14.03.90)
Has not scored regularly for his club sides, but Lagerback and Hallgrimsson like his physicality and work-rate.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

GOALKEEPER: Ingvar Jonsson (Sandefjord, Nor).

DEFENDERS: Jon Gudni Fjoluson (Norrkoping, Swe), Hallgrimur Jonasson (OB, Den), Kristinn Jonsson (Sarpsborg, Nor), Hjortur Valgardsson (Orebro, Swe).

MIDFIELDERS: Rurik Gislason (Nuremberg, Ger), Gudmundur Thorarinsson (Rosenborg, Nor).

FORWARD: Aron Sigurdarson (Tromso, Nor).

Blue-collar values

Hard work and organisation are the watchwords

At first glance, it is not difficult to find reasons why Italy's Euro 2016 campaign could go badly wrong. For a start, there is the continuing decline and fall of Serie A in European club competition. This season, for the first time since 2001, no Italian club qualified for a continental quarter-final.

On top of that, the national side has bombed out in the first round of the last two World Cups, in South Africa and Brazil. And a 4-1 drubbing in a March friendly by Germany hardly augurs well, either.

Yet despite all that, Italy will be expected to give a good account of themselves in France. Two considerations justify a cautious optimism: the nature of the coach Antonio Conte, and the solid if not spectacular progress that his side has made since he took over from Cesare Prandelli in August 2014.

In putting Juventus back on top of Italian football with three successive titles, from 2011 to 2014, Conte proved himself to be not only a technically complete coach but also arguably one of the most committed and inspirational bosses on the European scene. It now remains to be seen if he can transmit that same passion and vision to the *Azzurri*.

His team's qualification had a familiar look about it. Crowd problems against Croatia, underwhelming 1-0 home and away wins against Malta, and a record of seven victories and three draws from 10 games could all be called par for the Italian course. Drawn in a group with Croatia, Bulgaria, Norway, Azerbaijan and Malta, you would have expected Italy to do well. In the end, Croatia – the only team that might have caused problems – were handicapped by fan violence during a 1-1 draw in Milan and were docked a point after a swastika appeared to have been designed on the pitch in the return, also a 1-1 draw, in Split.

Much may inevitably depend on Italy's opening game this summer, against Belgium in Lyon. In a Brussels friendly in November, Italy matched their impressive hosts for a good hour, before succumbing to a 3-1 defeat. Conte will hope that his side can sustain their effort for longer this time and head into their second game, against Sweden in Toulouse, with at least a point in the bag.

An opening defeat by Belgium would make a game against Zlatan Ibrahimovic and company look extremely intimidating. However, if Conte's charges are still alive and running after Toulouse, they will probably feel confident of dealing with the Republic of Ireland.

Work rate, discipline and organisation count for more than individual flair in a team deprived of the Maldinis, Baggios, Del Pieros and Tottis of yesteryear.

These days the outstanding talents are men such as the Juve trio of goalkeeper Gigi Buffon and central defenders Leonardo Bonucci and Giorgio Chiellini, which leaves no space for the enigmatic talent of Mario Balotelli – who, to be fair, has played very little for Milan this season.

Paddy Agnew

> Conte is arguably one of the most inspirational coaches in Europe. It remains to be seen if he can transmit that passion and vision to the *Azzurri*

Flair... Stephan El Shaarawy is one of those capable of adding a touch of flair to Conte's Italy

Friendly fire...Italy celebrate scoring against Spain in March

THE VIEW FROM ITALY

"Clearly, this Italy is not at the same level as sides like Germany, Belgium and Spain, but in a finals tournament Italy usually gets motivated. On top of that, Italy has a very good coach and I think we will see a good team emerge, one good enough to get out of the first round. After that, obviously, it all depends on the draw."

Fabio Licari, Gazzetta dello Sport

Motivated...Licari

"Goalkeeper Gigi Buffon is arguably Italy's only world-class player but he is getting on and he recently conceded eight goals to Bayern Munich and to Germany at the Allianz Arena. So that makes you think. However, Italy often do well in finals tournaments and we should never pay too much attention to Italy's friendly form. Italy's trump card is the coach, Antonio Conte. However, you do have to wonder even about him. Will he be distracted by the Chelsea job and the 'Last Bet' court judgement?"

Maurizio Pizzoferrato, Agenzia Area

"I would like to think that Italy could finish in the first four, but you might need a mini miracle. Italian football is currently in a bit of a crisis and is not producing the great players. At best, however, we might have a medium strength side which comes together and does well."

Fabrizio Bocca, La Repubblica

HOW THEY LINE UP

Three at the back looks likely

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

There was a time when Italy would arrive at a finals with outstanding world talent in their ranks, but the reality about Antonio Conte's side is that, with the exception of 38-year-old keeper Gigi Buffon, he can't call on the level of talent afforded to *Azzurri* coaches before him.

It says much about the Italian attack that it is likely to feature an Italo-Brazilian, Eder, who was called up during the qualifying campaign, and an apparently out-of-form central target man, Graziano Pelle, who is reportedly coming to the end of his time at Southampton.

It stands to reason, then, that what Italy may lack in outstanding individual talent will be more than compensated for by the discipline, organisation and determination that are the Conte hallmark.

Following a painful 4-1 defeat by Germany in March, he may abandon 3-4-3 and revert to a more cautious 3-5-2 or indeed the classic 4-4-2.

In the best Italian tradition, Conte's side is built around a solid defence that relies essentially on the Juventus quartet of Buffon-Barzagli-Bonucci-Chiellini. This quartet sits tight in the centre of defence while the full-backs have licence to attack.

In midfield, Marco Verratti will step into Andrea Pirlo's playmaking role, and alongside him will probably be Antonio Candreva on the right and Stephan El Shaarawy on the left, both in attacking roles from which to supply central target man Pelle.

If need be, Eder will drop back into midfield, leaving Pelle as the lone man up front. If, for whatever reason, Conte decides to leave out Pelle, he has at least one ready-made substitute in Juventus striker Simone Zaza, who played in five of the 10 qualifiers.

Solid...Giorgio Chiellini is part of an all-Juve rearguard

SCHEDULE

MAY 29	v **Scotland** (F, Ta' Qali, Malta)
JUN 6	v **Finland** (F, tbc)
JUN 13	v **Belgium** (EC, Lyon, France)
JUN 17	v **Sweden** (EC, Toulouse, France)
JUN 22	v **Republic of Ireland** (EC, Lille, France)

THE COACH

ANTONIO CONTE
Age 46 (31.07.69)

A combative midfielder, he won a clean sweep of trophies during 13 seasons at Juventus, as well as 20 Italy caps.

As a coach, he won promotion to Serie A with Bari and Siena before taking charge of Juve and transforming a team that had finished seventh in consecutive seasons into an all conquering machine, lifting three successive Serie A titles.

He will join Chelsea after the Euros on a three-year contract having admitted he missed day-to-day club coaching.

CONTE IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"I've said that we're going to try to be a war machine, but I am not worried that the soldiers won't follow the general. Euro 2016 excites me. We've worked for two years to get here and this is a once-in-a-lifetime experience. There will be stronger teams than us – but we know that, with hard work and with teamwork, we can bridge the gap."

"There is no young and old, only victory or failure."

"We've worked two years to get here and I am revved up, charged and ready to go, of that there is no doubt. Experiences like this only happen to you once in your life and for me it is a matter of great pride to be the Italian coach and it has been that way since day one."

THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS

156
0

Gianluigi BUFFON
Juventus
Age 38 (28.01.78)
The most capped Italian of all time, he is an ideal captain: inspirational on the pitch and clued up off it.

11
0

Federico MARCHETTI
Lazio
Age 33 (07.02.83)
"Tarzan" is likely to replace injured Mattia Perin as third choice. Played three times in 2010 World Cup finals.

15
0

Salvatore SIRIGU
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)
Age 29 (12.01.87)
Lost his place at PSG but is likely to retain Conte's trust. In and around the Italy squad for the past six years.

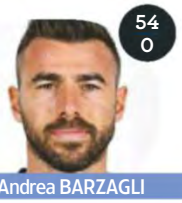
DEFENDERS

2
0

Francesco ACERBI
Sassuolo
Age 28 (10.02.88)
Diagnosed with testicular cancer in 2013 but is now recovered after four cycles of chemotherapy.

12
0

Luca ANTONELLI
Milan
Age 29 (11.02.87)
Left-back used only once during qualifying, but has experience and pace. A squad member since 2010.


54
0

Andrea BARZAGLI
Juventus
Age 35 (08.05.81)
A World Cup winner in 2006, arguably having his best-ever season with Juve. Can play in a back three or four.

55
3

Leonardo BONUCCI
Juventus
Age 29 (01.05.87)
Tough character who once flattened an armed robber outside a car showroom in Turin.

82
6

Giorgio CHIELLINI
Juventus
Age 31 (14.08.84)
An automatic first choice for the last decade, he was key for Conte's Juve and can play left-back or central defence.

21
1

Matteo DARMIAN
Manchester United (Eng)
Age 26 (02.12.89)
One of the few successes of Italy's disastrous 2014 World Cup, he played in all 10 Euro qualifiers.

22
0

Mattia DE SCIGLIO
Milan
Age 23 (20.10.92)
Has lots of pace and can play on either flank. Milan's improved second half of season has helped his chances.

MIDFIELDERS

2
0

Federico BERNARDESCHI
Fiorentina
Age 22 (16.02.94)
An attacking midfielder who made his debut in March in the friendlies against Spain and Germany.

36
3

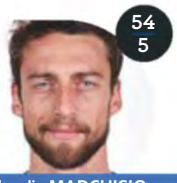
Antonio CANDREVA
Lazio
Age 29 (28.02.87)
His job is to provide the ammunition for Pelle from the right, but he is much more than just a decent crosser.

15
2

Alessandro FLORENZI
Roma
Age 25 (11.03.91)
Attacking midfielder but right-back for his club. Scored from 60 yards against Barcelona in the Champions League.

23
3

Emanuele GIACCHERINI
Sunderland (Eng)
Age 31 (05.05.85)
A regular under Cesare Prandelli, but lost place after moving to England. Back in Italy on loan at Bologna.


54
5

Claudio MARCHISIO
Juventus
Age 30 (19.01.86)
Dynamic, with an ability to provide cover in midfield, add attacking bite and chip in with goals.

25
1

Thiago MOTTA
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)
Age 33 (28.08.82)
Italo-Brazilian who was recalled in March. Brings experience, tactical awareness and a good touch.

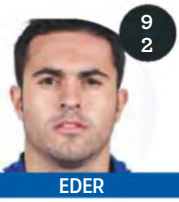
18
0

Marco PAROLO
Lazio
Age 31 (25.01.85)
Hard-working defensive midfielder who gets forward to effect. At the heart of Lazio's Europa League run.

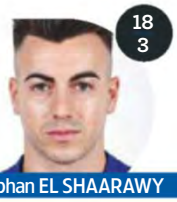
15
1

Marcio VERRATTI
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)
Age 23 (05.11.92)
Has blossomed since escaping the shadow of Andrea Pirlo but has big boots to fill in France.

FORWARDS


9
2

EDER
Sampdoria
Age 29 (15.11.86)
On loan at Inter, the Italo-Brazilian became the 43rd "oriundo" (foreigner of Italian origins) to be capped.


18
3

Stephan EL SHAARAWY
Milan
Age 23 (27.10.92)
Joined Monaco on loan in the summer and Roma in January. The son of an Egyptian who married an Italo-Swiss woman.

8
2

Lorenzo INSIGNE
Napoli
Age 24 (04.06.91)
Just 5ft 4in but able to look after himself. Has had a great season alongside Gonzalo Higuain in Serie A.

11
4

Graziano PELLE
Southampton (Eng)
Age 30 (15.07.85)
Central target man who has spent much of the Premier League season on the bench but could lead Conte's attack.

9
1

Simone ZAZA
Juventus
Age 24 (25.06.91)
Fourth in the pecking order at Juve (behind Dybala, Mandzukic and Morata) but played in five Euro qualifiers.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

GOALKEEPER: Gianluigi Donnarumma (Milan).

DEFENDERS: Davide Astori (Cagliari), Lorenzo De Silvestri (Sampdoria).

MIDFIELDERS: Giacomo Bonaventura (Milan), Daniele De Rossi (Roma), Jorghino (Napoli), Riccardo Montolivo (Milan), Andrea Pirlo (New York City, USA).

FORWARDS: Domenico Berardi (Sassuolo), Sebastian Giovinco (Toronto, USA), Ciro Immobile (Borussia Dortmund, Ger).

The 30-year itch

Generations of fans had dreamed in vain before Michael O'Neill's arrival

It's been a long wait for Northern Ireland fans, who are counting down the days to their team's first-ever participation in a European Championship. Thirty years have passed since the "glory days" of Billy Bingham's team, who did themselves proud at the World Cup finals in Spain in 1982 and, to a lesser extent, Mexico four years later. Indeed, many had given up hope of the nation of 1.8million ever being present at a major tournament again.

The closest Northern Ireland had come to a return to the big stage was when they missed out by goal difference on a play-off place at Euro 96 in England. Manager Bryan Hamilton's team finished equal on points with the Republic of Ireland, but finished in third place by one goal.

Twenty years on, when perhaps least expected, today's side upset all the odds to finish top of their group in the 2016 qualifiers. After finishing fifth in their group for the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, they had been regarded as "no-hopers" by even their own fans.

Michael O'Neill was appointed manager in December 2011, replacing Nigel Worthington, and his first nine matches yielded five draws and four defeats as he struggled to revive the country's fortunes.

O'Neill, now regarded as a miracle worker by supporters, admits: "We finished the campaign below Azerbaijan and just one point ahead of Luxembourg, who drew 1-1 with us in Belfast and beat us 3-2 in Luxembourg. We were rated 129th in the FIFA rankings, our lowest ever. I certainly wouldn't have been surprised to have been given the sack."

But his bosses at the IFA kept faith. There had been signs of positive things to come when drawing 1-1 away to Portugal in the World Cup qualifiers, and in August 2013 they beat Russia 1-0 at Windsor Park as O'Neill recorded his first victory.

The IFA were amply rewarded for their loyalty with a stunning Euro qualifying campaign, despite O'Neill having basically the same squad of players at his disposal.

After six wins, three draws and just one defeat, taking the country's FIFA ranking to the heights of 28th, the manager has attained the status of a national hero.

His charges – drawn mainly from the lower divisions of Scotland and England – certainly face a tough task in France. The opening game is against Poland, followed by Ukraine and finally world champions Germany.

O'Neill says: "During the qualification campaign we had the second-lowest amount of possession, but the highest number of scoring attempts, and I think that is very significant as we analyse our opponents and look to combat their strengths and exploit weaknesses.

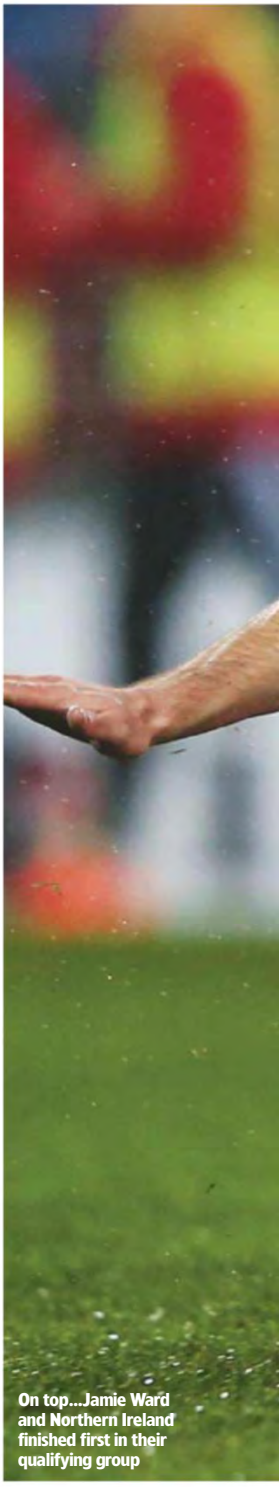
"We have a small pool of players and they will be playing for the first time in a major tournament. Many of the squad have little international experience, even at club level, so they'll be looking to prove themselves. We've imbued the players with belief and self-discipline.

"We're up against star players who play at a high level with their clubs. Germany are world champions, and Poland ran them close in the qualifiers and have perhaps the best striker in Europe in Robert Lewandowski. Ukraine are more of an unknown quantity. We will be looking to go into the final game against Germany with something to play for. I believe we can qualify for the second round."

That is a hope which, given O'Neill's track record in the qualifying campaign, is not an unrealistic one.

Roy Kitson

Premier performer...Paddy McNair is just one of Northern Ireland's top-flight backline



On top...Jamie Ward and Northern Ireland finished first in their qualifying group

THE VIEW FROM NORTHERN IRELAND

"To achieve what Michael O'Neill has done with the resources at his disposal is nothing short of a miracle – with a small pool of players. In my day we achieved some excellent results, defeating England and Spain, but then blotted our copybook by losing to teams we should have beaten comprehensively. The success of the team has acted as a unifying factor in

Miracle...Healy

a country, famous for its divisions rather than sharing a common purpose."

David Healy, Northern Ireland's record goalscorer

"We face three opponents, all of whom would be rated above us. But I believe we can surprise either Poland or Ukraine on the counter-attack. One thing is for sure: Michael will have the team organised, and our key men could prove to be Kyle Lafferty up front and skipper Steve Davis in midfield. He is a vital component and one of our key players. We are also fortunate to have a back division with Premier League players Jonny Evans, Craig Cathcart and Gareth McAuley in the centre of a defence which will be a crucial factor in any success."

Stephen Baxter, Crusaders manager

"We are up against teams – especially the Germans – who will exploit any weakness. Perhaps it is a strength that we do not have star names: everyone has a job, and we play to a system which doesn't change even if there are injuries. Each component of the side knows their job. On the downside, we will unfortunately miss the presence of the injured Chris Brunt, while we will be keeping our fingers crossed that Kyle Lafferty gets the game time that he needs with his loan move to Birmingham City."

Billy Hamilton, member of N Ireland's 1982 and 1986 World Cup teams

Key men...Baxter

HOW THEY LINE UP

O'Neill to switch as circumstances dictate

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

Never one to rest on his laurels, Michael O'Neill has been keen to test out new formations for the demands of three group games in the space of 10 days. During qualification he favoured a 4-3-3, 4-4-2 or 4-1-4-1 depending on the opposition, while he tested a 3-5-2 line-up in March's friendlies. The manager has no qualms about ditching a plan during the game and will adapt as circumstances dictate.

The loss of key left-sided defender Chris Brunt, who played in nine of the 10 qualifiers, with a cruciate ligament injury could mean a place for Daniel Lafferty, Shane Ferguson or Michael Smith, who all currently play in the English third tier.

Kyle Lafferty, the talismanic target man, will hopefully recover quickly from a groin strain incurred during the friendly against Slovenia and regain match sharpness with Championship side Birmingham City, on loan from Norwich City. He may well form a partnership with newcomer Conor Washington, of Queens Park Rangers, who has made a big impression in his two games so far.

Solid...Jonny Evans is likely to start in the back four

Conor McLaughlin, Jonny Evans, Gareth McAuley and Craig Cathcart would be the likely back four in the preferred 4-3-3 formation – more of a 4-5-1 without the ball – with wide attackers Jamie Ward and Stuart Dallas both being asked to defend from the front.

McLaughlin would drop out for a 3-5-2, with Washington or Josh Maggenis partnering Lafferty, and Niall McGinn or Corry Evans coming in to bolster midfield.

SCHEDULE

MAY 27	v **Belarus** (F, Belfast, N Ireland)
JUN 3	v **Slovakia** (F, Trnava, Slovakia)
JUN 12	v **Poland** (EC, Nice, France)
JUN 16	v **Ukraine** (EC, Lyon, France)
JUN 21	v **Germany** (EC, Paris, France)

THE COACH

MICHAEL O'NEILL
Age 46 (05.07.69)

Won 31 caps, scoring four goals, during his playing career and had a couple of years as a financial advisor before taking a part-time job as manager of Brechin City. Won the league twice with Dublin club Shamrock Rovers and in 2011 became the first man to take an Irish side to the group phase of the Europa League. His ability to coax the best out of his charges has seen him awarded a £2million, four-year contract, making him the highest-paid manager in Northern Ireland's history.

O'NEILL IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"Our mental focus must be 100 per cent and that has to be matched by our application. Belief in our ability to succeed is likewise essential and our coaches are doing a super job, along with tactical analyst Austin MacPhee."

"At the crucial moments, we have players who will step up to the mark and score the vital goals which can turn a match – players like Kyle Lafferty, Josh Magennis and newcomer Conor Washington."

"We have quality goalkeepers, Roy Carroll and Michael McGovern, who played five qualifiers apiece. In front of them our defence is strong and plays with discipline, brilliantly marshalled by Gareth McAuley and Jonny Evans. Captain Steve Davis is always reliable and he has been a key factor in our success."

THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS

43
0

Roy CARROLL
Notts County (Eng)
Age 38 (30.09.77)
The oldest member of the squad, injury saw him lose his place to McGovern. A leader on and off the pitch.

7
0

Alan MANNUS
St Johnstone (Sco)
Age 34 (19.05.82)
Canadian-born, he did not play in any qualifiers, but his excellent club form is likely to see him used as back-up.

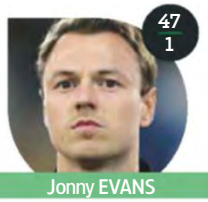
10
0

Michael McGOVERN
Hamilton Academical (Sco)
Age 31 (12.07.84)
Took over when Carroll was injured and kept his place for the final five games to help clinch automatic qualification.

DEFENDERS

26
2

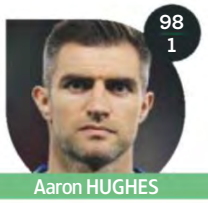
Craig CATHCART
Watford (Eng)
Age 27 (06.02.89)
Can play central or full-back on either side. A major factor in Watford's rise over the last couple of years.


47
1

Jonny EVANS
West Bromwich Albion (Eng)
Age 28 (03.01.88)
Plays alongside McAuley for club and country. Joined Manchester United at 18, playing more than 130 games.

15
0

Lee HODSON
MK Dons (Eng)
Age 24 (02.10.91)
Right-sided defender who joined MK Dons from Watford in 2013 and went on loan to Kilmarnock in February.


98
1

Aaron HUGHES
Melbourne City (Aus)
Age 36 (08.11.79)
Injury saw him miss the last six games of the campaign, but O'Neill still values the former skipper's experience.

13
0

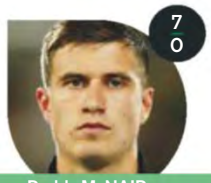
Daniel LAFFERTY
Burnley (Eng)
Age 27 (18.05.89)
Left-sided defender who joined Burnley in 2015 from Derry City. Currently on loan at Oldham Athletic.

60
7

Gareth McAULEY
West Bromwich Albion (Eng)
Age 36 (05.12.79)
Had three centre-half partners during the campaign. Rarely puts a foot wrong and a real danger from set-pieces.

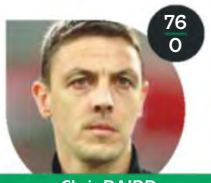
16
0

Conor McLAUGHLIN
Fleetwood Town (Eng)
Age 24 (26.07.91)
Right-back who plays in the English third tier but has proved himself at the highest level, playing in nine qualifiers.


7
0

Paddy McNAIR
Manchester United (Eng)
Age 21 (27.04.95)
Centre-back who likes to push forward and has been compared by United manager Louis Van Gaal to Gary Neville.

MIDFIELDERS


76
0

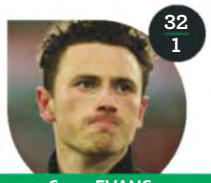
Chris BAIRD
Derby County (Eng)
Age 34 (25.2.82)
Right-sided defensive midfielder who went on loan to Fulham in February. Played in nine qualifiers.

12
1

Stuart DALLAS
Leeds United (Eng)
Age 25 (19.04.91)
Graduated from Irish League club Crusaders via Brentford and Northampton Town to Leeds in three years.

81
8

Steven DAVIS
Southampton (Eng)
Age 31 (01.01.85)
Captain who played in every qualifier except for Romania away – the side's only defeat. A highly consistent performer.


32
1

Corry EVANS
Blackburn Rovers (Eng)
Age 25 (30.07.90)
Younger brother of Jonny, he can play in an attacking or defensive midfield role. Started with Manchester United.

24
1

Shane FERGUSON
Millwall (Eng)
Age 24 (12.07.91)
Left-winger who can also play at full-back. He laid on both goals in the home win against the Faroe Islands.

41
2

Niall McGINN
Aberdeen (Sco)
Age 28 (20.07.87)
Right-winger who works hard and uses his pace to take on opposing defenders. Scored against Hungary in qualifying.

32
0

Oliver NORWOOD
Reading (Eng)
Age 25 (12.04.91)
Reads the game well and is a danger from set-pieces. Missed just 26 minutes of the whole qualifying campaign.

FORWARDS

7
0

Liam BOYCE
Ross County (Sco)
Age 25 (08.04.91)
Prolific goalscorer, although he did spend an unproductive year with Werder Bremen from 2010 to 2011.

49
16

Kyle LAFFERTY
Norwich City (Eng)
Age 28 (16.09.87)
A star for his country, he is hoping a loan to Birmingham City will give him some much-needed game time.

18
1

Josh MAGENNIS
Kilmarnock (Sco)
Age 25 (15.08.90)
Began as a goalkeeper, but switched to the outfield at 18. A fine athlete, with pace and power.

20
2

Jamie WARD
Nottingham Forest (Eng)
Age 30 (12.05.86)
Winger with a goalscorer's instinct who can also play up front. Born in England, qualifies through his grandfather.

2
1

Conor WASHINGTON
QPR (Eng)
Age 24 (18.05.92)
English-born ex-postman who had never been to Northern Ireland before his international call-up in March.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

DEFENDERS: Luke McCullough (Doncaster Rovers, Eng), Michael Smith (Peterborough United, Eng).

MIDFIELDERS: Ryan McLaughlin (Liverpool, Eng), Paddy McCourt (Luton Town, Eng), Paul Paton (Dundee United, Sco).

FORWARDS: Billy McKay (Wigan Athletic, Eng), Will Grigg (Wigan Athletic, Eng).

Blind optimism

History suggests Poland will fail to live up to huge domestic expectations

Four years ago Poland was praised for a well-organised co-hosting of Euro 2012 with Ukraine. Everything was near perfect – except for the hugely disappointing results of the national team, who finished bottom of their group. The country, which boasted modern stadiums and was enjoying fast economy growth, had a burning desire for football success that could not be satisfied.

When Poland beat the Republic of Ireland 2-1 in their final Euro 2016 qualifier to finish second in their group, behind Germany, it was regarded throughout the country as a huge success. The players celebrated on the pitch in Warsaw as though they had lifted the trophy itself, standing on a pitchside podium while confetti sprayed into the air. A handful of doubters pointed out that they had not yet won anything and had only secured automatic qualification because the number of finalists had been increased from 16 to 24.

The team's star, Robert Lewandowski, appealed to the media for commonsense. "Do not crown us European champions," he said. "It is a very long way ahead."

But when Poland beat Serbia (1-0) and Finland (5-0) in friendlies in March, expectations went up a notch. Some people even started to talk about a "possible seven games in France" – in other words, the Euro 2016 Final. This time Poland's goalkeeper, Artur Boruc, appealed: "Please, do not blow up this balloon". The Polish FA, however, would appear not to share the optimism and has announced the start of a new season before the end of Euro 2016, with the Super Cup game due for July 9.

FA chairman Zbigniew Boniek took a big decision to hire Adam Nawalka as coach when Waldemar Fornalik was sacked after an unsuccessful 2014 World Cup qualification campaign. Nawalka was described by Boniek as a "perfect choice" and the charismatic new man insisted on a discipline that helped to mould the team spirit that in turn proved to be a key element in securing qualification. Yet, having overseen a successful campaign, Nawalka's contract was only extended until the end of this summer's finals. If Boniek values him so much, why has he not been offered a longer deal?

> "Poland are probably one of the strongest national teams in Europe going forwards"
>
> **Iceland co-coach Heimir Hallgrimsson**

When Poland beat neighbouring Germany for the first time ever – 2-0 in Warsaw in October 2014 – a total euphoria overtook the whole country.

Only a few paid attention to the fact that the Poles had played poorly in the first half and could have lost by two or three goals. Fortunately, after the break they scored twice against opponents who were preoccupied with rebuilding after becoming world champions. With the exception of the final qualifier against Ireland, all of Poland's qualifying matches followed the same distinct pattern: uneven games with polar opposite first and second halves.

After defeating Iceland 4-2 in a home friendly in November 2015, the Nordic nation's co-coach Heimir Hallgrimsson added to the positive mood by declaring: "Poland are probably one of the strongest national teams in Europe going forwards."

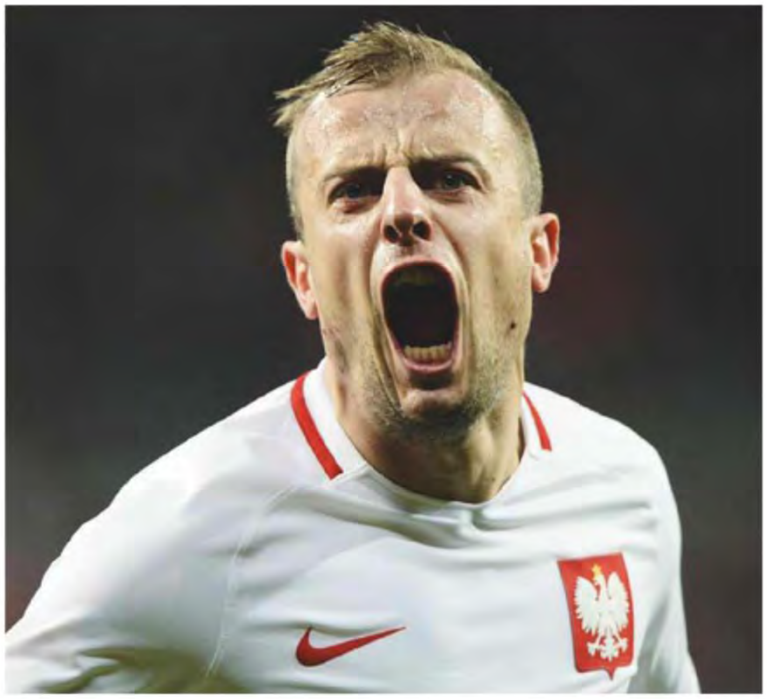
He has a point. Lewandowski was the qualifying tournament's top scorer with 13 goals, but the whole team deserve praise as they scored more times than anyone else, registering 33 during the campaign.

But on the other hand, Poland conceded too many goals. Among the teams who advanced automatically, only the Czech Republic had a worse defensive record, conceding 14 goals to Poland's 10.

Tightening up their back line would certainly make Poland a difficult side to beat, but since 2002 they have exited the big tournaments at the group stage: the 2002 and 2006 World Cups, Euro 2008 and Euro 2012.

It's worth pointing out that the expectations at home were almost as high on each of those occasions. Can this be the time they live up to those dreams?

Dariusz Kurowski



Shout to the top...Poland's Kamil Grosicki scored four goals in nine qualifying appearances

Excited...Poland players celebrate qualification for Euro 2016

Crucial...Jerzy Dudek

THE VIEW FROM POLAND

"We are in an interesting group. It will be difficult for everyone, but Germany seem to be firm favourites. Northern Ireland, described as underdogs, can give somebody a surprise – I hope it is not in the opening match against Poland! Our team could fight for the knockout stage in the last game against Ukraine. Robert Lewandowski in top form will be crucial for the team, but we can be strong as a collective. Getting to the knockout stage is the minimum expectation for Poland."

Ex-Poland goalkeeper Jerzy Dudek

"Poland is a team with a few European stars and a huge desire for success. Based on that, they should get promotion to the knockout stage. Then it depends on how strong their next opponents are. But generally, Poland is a good and interesting team, and I believe that they will achieve something at this tournament."

Former national coach Jerzy Engel

Positive...Szpakowski

"This is a team with considerable potential [to do well at Euro 2016]. The minimum aim is getting promotion from Group C. The key to success will be a victory in the opening game with Northern Ireland, who are not easy opponents. If Poland play the same as in their best qualifiers, and have no injuries to key players, they can show a really impressive style to get success. Generally, I am very optimistic."

Dariusz Szpakowski, Polish TV's best-known match commentator

HOW THEY LINE UP

Strong spine is key

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

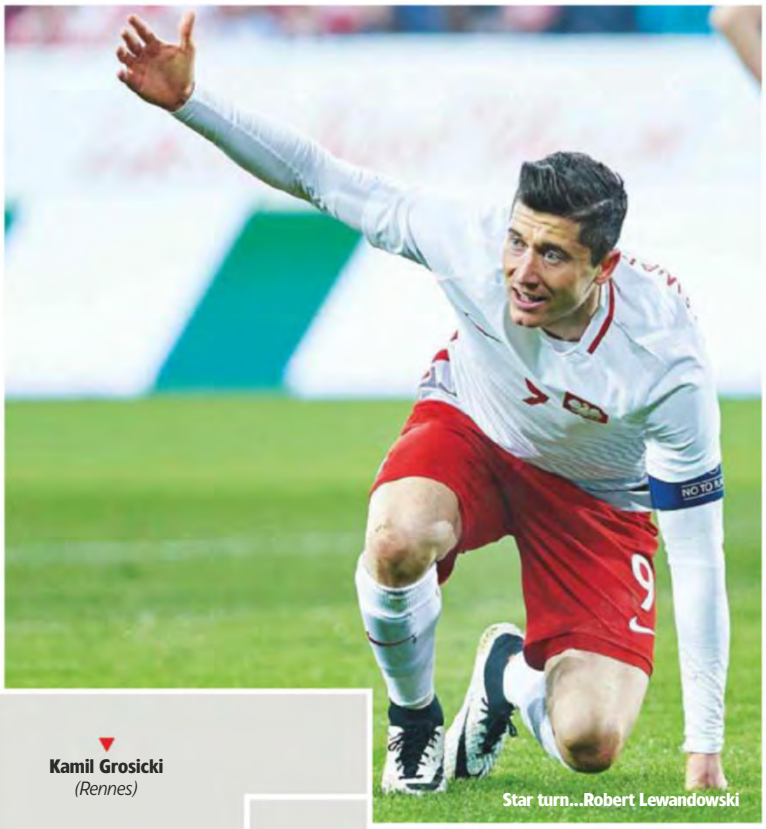
Whether Poland adopt a 4-2-3-1 or a 4-4-2, the spine of the team will remain the same: Lukasz Fabianski or Wojciech Szczesny in goal; central defender Kamil Glik; defensive midfielder Grzegorz Krychowiak; attacking midfielder or second striker Arkadiusz Milik and striker Robert Lewandowski.

Lewandowski is the unquestioned team leader and by far the country's biggest star. At the time that Adam Nawalka was appointed, the centre-forward had his critics, notably because he did not score as many goals for Poland as he did at club level. But the new coach stuck by his striker, made him captain and declared: "I have to re-organise the style of team play to make the most of his potential and skills as a finisher."

Lewandowski had struggled leading the line in the past, but now he has help from Milik, either as a slightly withdrawn second striker or from an attacking midfield role. The partnership has worked well, with Lewandowski the tournament's top scorer in qualifying with 13 and Milik chipping in with six goals and six assists.

For the team to be successful, the quick wide men, Jakub Blaszczykowski and Kamil Grosicki, will be expected to create the goalscoring opportunities.

The team's biggest problem is in defence. There is a question mark over who can play alongside the experienced and solid Glik at centre-half. Another problem spot is left-back, where Maciej Rybus has been filling in.



Star turn...Robert Lewandowski

SCHEDULE

JUN 1
v **Holland** (F, Gdansk, Poland)
JUN 6
v **Lithuania** (F, Krakow, Poland)
JUN 12
v **Northern Ireland** (EC, Nice, France)
JUN 16
v **Germany** (EC, Saint-Denis, France)
JUN 21
v **Ukraine** (EC, Marseilles, France)

THE COACH

ADAM NAWALKA
Age 58 (23.10.57)
Former Wisla Krakow midfielder who played for Poland, along with Zbigniew Boniek, at the 1978 World Cup. This friendship saw him recruited from Gornik Zabrze in October 2013 after his former team-mate was elected chairman of the Polish FA a year earlier. Was assistant to national coach Leo Beenhakker for a year, but his biggest success was winning the Polish championship and League Cup with Wisla in 2001. He is a perfectionist who demands great discipline from his players.

NAWALKA IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"The national team job is an unbelievable honour and aim for each ambitious coach. I am ready for it. Nothing will break me."

"For me, details are the most important thing. They determine success."

"I must see a desire to win not only during the games, but also during all training sessions."

"I adore creative players who work for a team, not for themselves. You do not even need a huge talent in players – if they co-operate well together they are able to achieve better results than their individual potential."

"[Players] should be prepared to sweat blood, sweat and tears for the shirt."

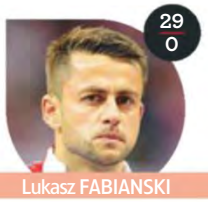
THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS

62 / 0

Artur BORUC
Bournemouth (Eng)
Age 36 (20.02.80)
Brave keeper who was a key performer for his country at the 2006 World Cup and Euro 2008.

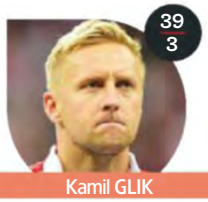

29 / 0

Lukasz FABIANSKI
Swansea City (Eng)
Age 31 (18.04.85)
Mostly a sub at Arsenal before moving to Swansea to become no1. On the bench at World Cup 2006 and Euro 2008.

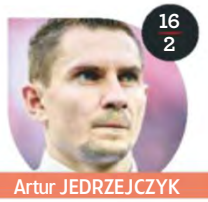
25 / 0

Wojciech SZCZESNY
Arsenal (Eng)
Age 26 (18.04.90)
Joined Roma on loan last year. His father, Maciej, was a keeper who won five Polish titles with four different clubs.

DEFENDERS


39 / 3

Kamil GLIK
Torino (Ita)
Age 28 (03.02.88)
Powerful in the air, he was a Real Madrid reserve before returning to Poland and then moving on to Italy.


16 / 2

Artur JEDRZEJCZYK
Krasnodar (Rus)
Age 28 (04.11.87)
Versatile right-back who returned to Legia Warsaw on loan in January after more than two years in Russia.

16 / 0

Michal PAZDAN
Legia Warsaw
Age 28 (21.09.87)
Uncompromising centre-back or defensive midfielder, known as "Piranha". A member of Poland's Euro 2008 squad.

45 / 2

Lukasz PISZCZEK
Borussia Dortmund (Ger)
Age 31 (03.06.85)
Former striker who is now a right-back and links well with club-mate Blaszczykowski down the flank.

41 / 2

Maciej RYBUS
Terek Grozny (Rus)
Age 26 (19.08.89)
Quick and dynamic left-sided player who can operate in midfield, but Nawalka has used him at left-back since last year.

7 / 0

Bartosz SALAMON
Cagliari (Ita)
Age 25 (01.05.91)
Tall centre-back or midfielder who returned to the national team in March after poor spells with Milan and Sampdoria.

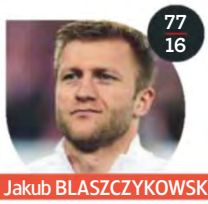
17 / 1

Lukasz SZUKALA
Osmanlispor (Tur)
Age 32 (26.05.84)
Centre-back who moved to Germany as a child and played in Romania and Saudi Arabia before moving to Turkey.

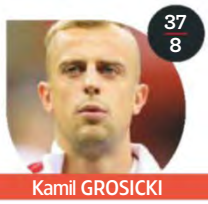
45 / 1

Jakub WAWRZYNIAK
Lechia Gdansk
Age 32 (07.07.83)
Left-footed defender who has previously appeared in midfield and up front. First played for Poland in 2006.

MIDFIELDERS


77 / 16

Jakub BLASZCZYKOWSKI
Borussia Dortmund (Ger)
Age 30 (14.12.85)
On loan at Fiorentina. His uncle, Jerzy Brzeczek, was captain of Poland's 1992 Olympic runners-up.


37 / 8

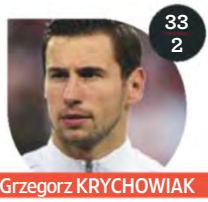
Kamil GROSICKI
Rennes (Fra)
Age 28 (08.06.88)
Loves to attack at pace and causes danger when running from deep. Moved to France from Turkey two years ago.

41 / 1

Tomasz JODLOWIEC
Legia Warsaw
Age 30 (08.09.85)
Very experienced and physically strong defensive midfielder who made his international debut in 2010.

5 / 2

Bartosz KAPUSTKA
Cracovia
Age 19 (23.12.96)
Huge talent who can operate as an attacking midfielder or a winger. Scored on his debut against Gibraltar last year.


33 / 2

Grzegorz KRYCHOWIAK
Sevilla (Spa)
Age 26 (29.01.90)
Defensive midfielder who joined Bordeaux as a teenager. Won the 2015 Europa League after joining Sevilla in 2014.

9 / 1

Karol LINETTY
Lech Poznan
Age 21 (02.02.95)
A versatile midfielder who has been capped from under-15 upwards, first linking with the senior squad in 2014.

14 / 1

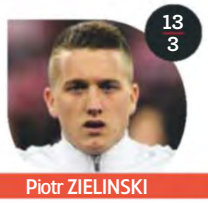
Krzysztof MACZYNSKI
Wisla Krakow
Age 29 (23.05.87)
Defensive or central midfielder who played for coach Nawalka at Gornik Zabrze. Should be fit after knee surgery in February.

2 / 1

Filip STARZYNSKI
Lokeren (Blg)
Age 25 (27.05.91)
Attacking midfielder who can also play centrally. Currently back in Poland on loan at Zaglebie Lubin.

8 / 2

Pawel WSZOLEK
Sampdoria (Ita)
Age 24 (30.04.92)
Had difficult time at Sampdoria after moving from Polonia Warsaw in 2013 and loaned to Verona this term.


13 / 3

Piotr ZIELINSKI
Udinese (Ita)
Age 22 (20.05.94)
Skilful playmaker who has been on loan at Empoli and is a rumoured summer target for Liverpool.

FORWARDS

75 / 34

Robert LEWANDOWSKI
Bayern Munich (Ger)
Age 27 (21.08.88)
Scored five goals in nine minutes for Bayern last year. His wife, Anna, has won world medals in karate.

24 / 10

Arkadiusz MILIK
Ajax (Hol)
Age 22 (28.02.94)
Left-footed striker who also plays as an attacking midfielder. Signed for Ajax in 2015 after a loan spell.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

GOALKEEPER: Przemyslaw Tyton (Stuttgart, Ger).

DEFENDERS: Thiago Cionek (Palermo, Ita), Igor Lewczuk (Legia Warsaw), Pawel Olkowski (Cologne, Ger).

MIDFIELDERS: Ariel Borysiuk (Legia Warsaw), Sebastian Mila (Lechia Gdansk), Slawomir Peszko (Lechia Gdansk).

FORWARDS: Mariusz Stepinski (Ruch Chorzow), Artur Sobiech (Hanover, Ger).

A new hope

Bright young midfield talent set to shine this summer

Portugal have an impressive European Championship record, reaching the semi-finals three times and the Final once in six appearances. They also have the outstanding player at the tournament, a core of experienced, solid performers and an exciting crop of young talents.

After taking over in September 2014, coach Fernando Santos won all seven of the remaining Euro 2016 qualification games, setting a record winning streak of competitive games for Portugal. And while his team is far from perfect, it is these sort of facts that give *Selecao* fans plenty of grounds for optimism.

How far Portugal go in the finals will depend on how well they mitigate some obvious weaknesses, the most evident of which is the national team's perennial problem: the lack of a quality striker. The fact their only recognised centre-forward in France is likely to be Eder tells you all you need to know about the desperate lack of options in this position.

If Portugal's opponents can successfully stifle Cristiano Ronaldo – easier said than done, of course – scoring goals may be troublesome. That said, an outstanding array of midfielders has brought real hope that, for the first time in years, Portugal may not be so utterly reliant on their captain. The depth, range and quality of Santos' options in midfield has led to calls for the adoption of a striker-less system, as implemented by Spain when they lifted the trophy four years ago in Kiev.

Bernardo Silva and Joao Mario have firmly established themselves as among the most exciting up-and-coming creative midfielders in Europe, William Carvalho and Danilo provide high-quality holding options, while for out-and-out dynamism Andre Gomes, Renato Santos and Adrien Silva have shown outstanding form this season. Whatever combination the coach hits upon, it is likely Joao Moutinho will be the only representative of the "old guard", as a fresh-looking, potentially thrilling new era is ushered in.

> "Since I have been playing for the national team there have never been so many high-quality young players available"
>
> **Cristiano Ronaldo**

Portugal's embarrassment of riches in midfield does not extend to its defence. The ageing central defenders Ricardo Carvalho and Pepe are the probable starters, while left-back Fabio Coentrao's ongoing injury problems and Fernando Santos' variety of selections at right-back makes the defensive unit difficult to predict. Uncertainty surrounding the personnel at the back makes it imperative for Portugal to defend as a team, which is an area the coach excels at. Santos has transposed the defensive solidity he imposed as Greece coach to his home country with conspicuous success. Nine of the 10 victories with Santos at the helm have been by one-goal margins, almost all of them of the low-scoring variety.

But Portugal's ability to make a splash at Euro 2016 will be dictated by what the team does further up the pitch. "Since I've been playing for the national team there have never been so many high-quality young players available," enthuses Ronaldo.

If the new generation transfer their club form to the international arena, Portugal's skipper may yet fulfil his wish of bringing his country silverware for the first time. But given the team's obvious flaws, a last-four finish would be considered a success.

Tom Kundert

Silva service...Rafa Silva is one of a bright crop of young midfielders turning on the style for Portugal

Flying the flag... Cristiano Ronaldo will be ably supported at Euro 2016

THE VIEW FROM PORTUGAL

"I think Portugal have a very good chance. We have an excellent team. I know many of the players personally and I know there is an excellent spirit within the squad, and the team has a very good coach at the helm. I think everything is in place for Portugal to have a good tournament. I'd love the *Selecao* to

Proud...Ricardo

triumph, but what is important above all is that the players honour the shirt and, whether they win or not, they make the Portuguese people proud."

Ex-international goalkeeper Ricardo

"As well as having one of the world's best players, Cristiano Ronaldo, we have a good mix of experienced players, who have played in previous European Championships and World Cups, and younger players who can add something extra to the team. We were drawn in a group that in theory is accessible, but Portugal's history shows that very often in supposedly easier games our team does not play so well. Although we are favourites in the group, we have to prove it on the pitch. I believe Portugal have a team to make it to the last eight at least."

Former Portugal striker Nuno Gomes

Belief...Nuno Gomes

"I think we're going to have a great Euro. France should be avoided, but Portugal can beat anybody if we're at the top of our game and if we play without fear. Portugal are a great team when they are in good shape, as they showed at Euro 2012 – even against the eventual winners Spain. Ronaldo is obviously vital. When Cristiano does well in tournaments, Portugal do well."

Ex-Portugal winger Paulo Futre

HOW THEY LINE UP

Too late to try out a false nine?

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

Portugal's traditional template has been 4-3-3, and Fernando Santos has stuck to the formation for the majority of his matches in charge so far. But with the *Selecao*'s perennial lack of a quality centre-forward and an abundance of fabulously talented midfielders, many have called for a switch to a 4-4-2 system or even an imitation of Spain's striker-less formation at Euro 2012, with Bernardo Silva used as a false number nine.

Lack of time to experiment with such a radical tactical shift makes it more likely that Cristiano Ronaldo will be used as a central forward, despite a mountain of evidence to suggest he is far less effective in that position than cutting in from wide on the left for Portugal. There is, however, simply no other quality striker available.

Fernando Santos experimented with a theoretically fluid front three of Nani, Danny and Ronaldo, but the chemistry was not there. He will probably go for something similar in France, and on current form the front three would comprise Bernardo Silva, Ronaldo and one of either Rafa Silva or Nani.

Don't be surprised if Santos switches tactics mid-match though, as he often did in qualifying, pushing Ronaldo to a fixed central striker position in a more conventional 4-3-3 or 4-4-2, a change which resulted in several important late goals for the *Selecao*.

If Portugal progress deep into the tournament, Santos may be tempted to partner his two high-quality holding midfielders, Danilo and William Carvalho, in a 4-2-3-1 when his side comes up against powerful opposition.

Decision... Cristiano Ronaldo

SCHEDULE

MAY 28	v **Norway** (F, Porto, Portugal)
JUN 2	v **England** (F, London, England)
JUN 5	v **Estonia** (F, Lisbon, Portugal)
JUN 14	v **Iceland** (EC, Saint-Etienne, France)
JUN 18	v **Austria** (EC, Paris, France)
JUN 22	v **Hungary** (EC, Lyon, France)

THE COACH

FERNANDO SANTOS
Age 61 (10.10.54)

One of a handful of coaches to have managed all of Portugal's "*Tres Grandes*" – Benfica, Porto and Sporting – he also has several major Greek clubs on his CV.

He won the Portuguese title with Porto in 1999, but his greatest achievements came when he took over Greece's national team, guiding them to Euro 2012 and the 2014 World Cup, and reaching the knockout stage on both occasions.

He took the job as Portugal boss when Paulo Bento was sacked on the back of a disappointing World Cup in Brazil, followed by a 1-0 home defeat by Albania at the start of qualification for Euro 2016. The transformation in the team's results was immediate, and they won all seven of their remaining qualifiers.

A pragmatic coach who places the emphasis on strong defensive organisation, he has been quietly overseeing a profound transition in the national side as he ushers in a new generation of talented youngsters. In contrast to his predecessor, he is keen to give everyone a look-in; in his first year in charge he called up 53 different players.

SANTOS IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"Eusebio or Ronaldo? You can't compare geniuses. Is Mozart better than Beethoven?"

"I believe we can win Euro 2016. If this team keeps its concentration, with the quality it has, it will be difficult to beat us."

"With the talent we have coming through I have no doubt that a successful future is guaranteed [for Portugal]."

THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS

35
0

EDUARDO

Dinamo Zagreb (Cro)
Age 33 (19.09.82)
Experienced campaigner who enjoyed a magnificent 2010 World Cup as Portugal's first choice.

3
0

Anthony LOPES

Lyon (Fra)
Age 25 (01.10.90)
Born and bred in France, he qualifies through Portuguese parents. He boasts superb reflexes and great anticipation.

43
0

RUI PATRICIO

Sporting
Age 28 (15.02.88)
The national team's undisputed number one, recently signed a long-term contract with Sporting.

DEFENDERS

84
10

BRUNO ALVES

Fenerbahce (Tur)
Age 34 (27.11.81)
Tough-tackling former Porto captain who holds the record as Portugal's highest-scoring defender.

9

CEDRIC

Southampton (Eng)
Age 24 (31.08.91)
German-born right-back who is a fine crosser of the ball. He's enjoyed a solid debut season in the Premier League.

14
1

ELISEU

Benfica
Age 32 (01.10.83)
Another converted winger, he is better going forward than he is defending. First choice in a successful Benfica side.

51
5

FABIO COENTRAO

Real Madrid (Spa)
Age 28 (11.03.88)
A tenacious left-back and former winger. On loan at Monaco but faces a battle to be fit in time for the Euros.

9
0

Jose FONTE

Southampton (Eng)
Age 32 (22.12.83)
Captain of his club and highly rated in England. He had to wait until hitting 30 before making his Portugal debut.

70
3

PEPE

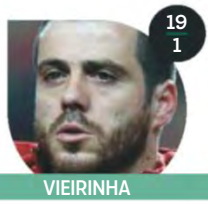
Real Madrid (Spa)
Age 33 (26.02.83)
Powerful centre-back who owes his imposing physique to training by jumping in the sea while wearing weights.

83
5

RICARDO CARVALHO

Monaco (Fra)
Age 38 (18.05.78)
Frozen out of the team after falling out with previous coach Paulo Bento. Santos did not hesitate in recalling him.

MIDFIELDERS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VIEIRINHA

Wolfsburg (Ger)
Age 30 (24.01.86)
His conversion from winger was so successful that he was voted the best right-back in the Bundesliga last season.

7
0

ADRIEN SILVA

Sporting
Age 27 (15.03.89)
Born in France and has flourished under club coach Jorge Jesus. A fierce competitor with a silky touch.

5
0

ANDRE GOMES

Valencia (Spa)
Age 22 (30.07.93)
All-action midfielder who has been outstanding in Spain over the past two seasons despite his club's chronic instability.

6
0

BERNARDO SILVA

Monaco (Spa)
Age 21 (10.08.94)
Exciting winger who can also play as a no10, his skill and quick-thinking make him a potential star of Euro 2016.

9
0

DANILO

Porto
Age 24 (09.09.91)
Physically imposing holding midfielder who has been one of the few bright spots in a difficult season for his club.

8
0

JOAO MARIO

Sporting
Age 23 (19.01.93)
Elegant, creative and intelligent midfielder who broke into the Sporting side early last season and has got better and better.

81
4

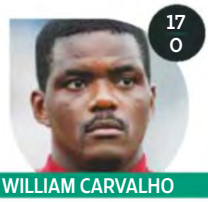
JOAO MOUTINHO

Monaco (Fra)
Age 29 (08.09.86)
The diminutive midfield dynamo has been Portugal's most important player – after Ronaldo – for several years.

6
0

RAFA SILVA

Braga
Age 23 (17.05.93)
Direct and technically gifted winger with an eye for goal. Was released by Sporting as a boy.


17
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WILLIAM CARVALHO

Sporting
Age 24 (07.04.92)
The powerful, Angolan-born defensive midfielder was voted best player at 2015's Euro Under-21s.

FORWARDS

23
1

EDER

Swansea City (Eng)
Age 28 (22.12.87)
Has struggled for form since suffering a knee-ligament tear in early 2013. He joined Lille on loan in January.

94
17

NANI

Fenerbahce (Tur)
Age 29 (17.11.86)
His Manchester United career fizzled out, but he re-found his spark first in Portugal, at Sporting, and now in Turkey.

47
4

RICARDO QUARESMA

Besiktas (Tur)
Age 32 (26.09.83)
Mercurial winger and king of the *trivela* – shot or cross with the outside of his foot. Likely to figure off the bench in France.

125
56

Cristiano RONALDO

Real Madrid (Spa)
Age 31 (05.02.85)
Has obliterated the country's goalscoring record and is on the verge of becoming their most-capped player.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

GOALKEEPER: Jose Marafona (Braga).

DEFENDERS: Raphael Guerreiro (Lorient, Fra), Paulo Oliveira (Sporting), Ricardo Pereira (Porto).

MIDFIELDERS: Andre Andre (Porto), Danny (Zenit, Rus), Tiago (Atletico Madrid, Spa), Ruben Neves (Porto), Renato Sanches (Benfica).

FORWARD: Nelson Oliveira (Benfica).

Battling back

A late fightback sealed the Republic's place in France via the play-offs

The European Championship holds special memories for Irish supporters as Euro 88 was the first finals tournament for which the Republic qualified. But there are no happy memories of Euro 2012 and fans will be hoping that Martin O'Neill is more adventurous than Giovanni Trapattoni was in Poland four years ago.

The Irish players were not happy with Trapattoni in 2012 as they spent too much time at a training camp in Italy. This time the Irish will play Holland in Dublin and then move to Fota Island holiday resort in Cork to prepare.

O'Neill's task in his first campaign as an international manager was to get the Republic of Ireland to the Euro 2016 finals and he just about did that, finishing third in what was a tough group and then beating Bosnia-Herzegovina in a play-off.

He made a good start in the qualifiers, beating Georgia in Tbilisi thanks to a late strike from Aiden McGeady and then demonstrated he was not afraid of making a hard call when dropping captain and record goalscorer Robbie Keane for the game against Scotland at Parkhead. The Irish disappointed that night and, when they could only draw with Poland and Scotland in Dublin, it was wasn't looking good for that play-off spot.

> "There are no superstars to choose from and O'Neill has done well with a mix of Premier League and Championship players"

However, O'Neill never gave up hope and Ireland's fortunes changed in the first week of September last year. While Scotland, who were the Republic's main challengers for the play-off spot, lost away to Georgia and at home to Germany, Ireland picked up maximum points away to Gibraltar and at home to Georgia. Then came the 1-0 home win over Germany at the Aviva in October thanks to a Shane Long goal. That win meant the Irish had taken four out of a possible six points from the world champions.

There was little time for the players to recover from their Germany exploits and three days later they were beaten 2-1 by Poland in Warsaw. So, for the eighth time in a major tournament, it was the play-off route for the Irish.

Luckily, the first leg of the play-off away to Bosnia was not abandoned due to fog and the Irish emerged from the Zenica mist with a comfortable 2-1 away win, before duly finishing the job in Dublin.

O'Neill surprised a lot of people when Shay Given was injured against Germany, by calling on Darren Randolph from the bench rather than David Forde. There are no superstars for him to choose from and he has done well with a mixture of Premier League and Championship players. Now he faces some difficult calls. Will he wait for Given and will there be game time in France for veteran Keane?

The Republic have played a total of 19 games in the European Championship and World Cup since 1988, winning only three and drawing nine. They are capable of beating Sweden but, unless someone hits a purple patch, it his hard to see them beating Belgium or Italy, where one or maybe two draws is probably the best to hope for.

Sean Creedon

Full stretch...Jon Walters in action against Bosnia-Herzegovina

Happy days...at the Aviva after sealing qualification

THE VIEW FROM REP OF IRELAND

"What I like about this team is that they have great team spirit and work rate. They remind me of Irish teams I played for in the past. We don't have any superstars, but I like the honest approach of players like Jon Walters. I appointed Martin O'Neill manager of Sunderland when I was chairman there. He did well at Sunderland and I think he has done a

Spirit...Niall Quinn

great job with this Irish team. We won't be overawed in France and I wouldn't rule out Martin leading the team to the second round."

Niall Quinn, former Irish player and now a Sky Sports pundit

"Much will depend on the result of the first game against Sweden. I feel it will be a scrap between Sweden and ourselves for third place, which can be enough to make the last 16 in the new format. But we will need a minimum of three points to achieve that and the best opportunity will be in the first game. For Martin O'Neill it was important that the best performances came towards the end of qualification. His team shape should ensure a better outcome than Trapattoni's team in Poland four years ago. If they make the last 16, they will be a tough nut to crack from then on."

Brian Kerr, former Republic of Ireland manager

"Few people thought we would make it after the team failed to beat Scotland at home in June and it is the latter part of the campaign – the way the team battled back from the brink of elimination – and, in particular, the win over Germany, that provides some cause for optimism. That victory over Germany suggests Martin O'Neill has restored the belief within the team that anything is possible, something that had been lost through years, when being hard to beat seemed to be as much as we aspired to. We are in a tough group, but a place in the second round would be good."

Emmet Malone, Irish Times

Tough nut...Brian Kerr

HOW THEY LINE UP

Keane no longer has legs for lone front role

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

Martin O'Neill looks spoiled for choice in the goalkeeping department. With veteran Shay Given struggling to be fit, Darren Randolph is likely to start and there is plenty of cover in David Forde and Keiren Westwood. Rob Elliot looked certain to be included, but injured his knee against Slovakia in March.

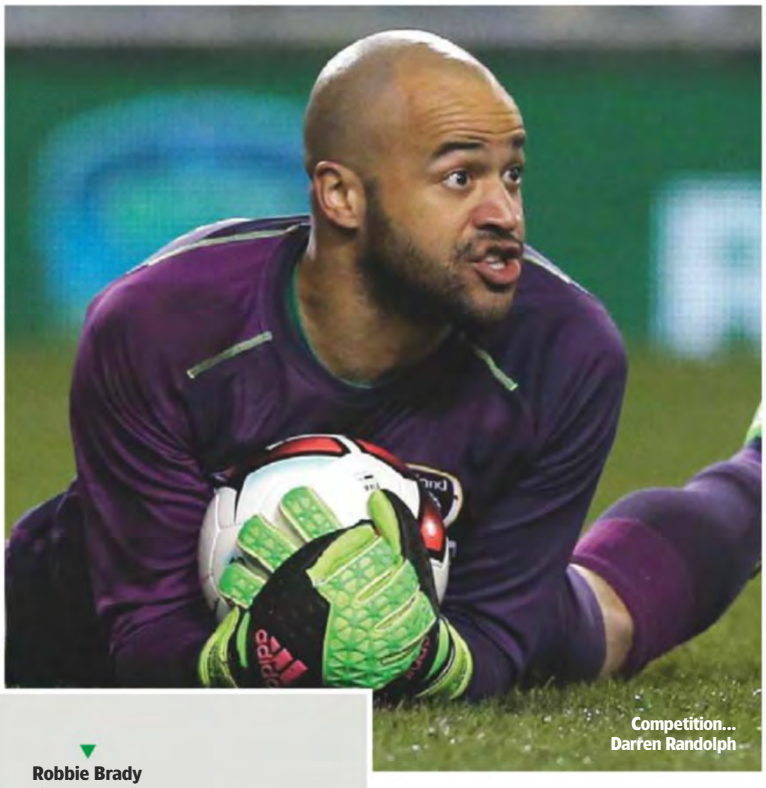
The back four is steady with veteran John O'Shea and Richard Keogh likely to be the central defenders. However, Shane Duffy and Ciaran Clark are not far behind. Seamus Coleman is a classy right-back, while Clark could play on the other flank.

Robbie Brady or Stephen Ward could also play at left-back, with Brady likely to be included in midfield if O'Neill goes with a 4-5-1 or a 4-2-3-1 formation.

Aiden McGeady normally plays on the right of midfield, and O'Neill has always been a fan of his, but McGeady hasn't played much this season. James McCarthy, Glenn Whelan and Jeff Hendrick will therefore compete for the two central midfield roles. Wes Hoolahan is often used as the playmaker and he will sit in behind a lone front man.

With Robbie Keane no longer able to play that role, Shane Long will compete with Daryl Murphy, who although a regular goalscorer in the Championship has yet to break his duck in 20 internationals. The veteran Keane may, however, get the chance of one last finals appearance from the bench.

If O'Neill decides to switch to a 4-4-2 formation, Walters will more than likely be pushed further forward to partner Long up front.



Competition... Darren Randolph

SCHEDULE

MAY 27	v **Holland** (F, Dublin, Rep Ireland)
MAY 31	v **Belarus** (F, Cork, Rep Ireland)
JUN 13	v **Sweden** (EC, Paris, France)
JUN 18	v **Belgium** (EC, Bordeaux, France)
JUN 22	v **Italy** (EC, Lille, France)

THE COACH

MARTIN O'NEILL
Age 64 (01.03.52)
A popular choice when taking over from caretaker Noel King in November 2013, who stepped in when Giovanni Trapattoni left in September. Perhaps overshadowed by his assistant Roy Keane in the early days, he says he and the former national skipper get on very well and he often jokes about the ex-midfielder's temper. Twice won the League Cup as manager of Leicester City and led Celtic to three Scottish Premiership tiles and the 2003 UEFA Cup Final.

O'NEILL IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"Bringing Roy Keane in was as good a decision as I have made in quite some time. He has been absolutely enormous for us. He is not taking too many of the accolades, but he's been fantastic for myself, the backroom staff and the players."

"Jon Walters was the heartbeat of our team during the qualifying campaign."

"There was great euphoria when we qualified. The games against Switzerland and Slovakia [in March] gave me an opportunity to experiment. I think it will be after the Holland game at the end of May before I finalise my squad. We showed against Germany in Dublin last October that we can compete with the best. We must be strong mentally in France."

THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS

23
0

David FORDE

Millwall (Eng)
Age 36 (20.12.79)
Played in the first four Euro qualifiers, but now out of favour and has since lost his place at club level.

133
0

Shay GIVEN

Stoke City (Eng)
Age 40 (20.04.76)
Came out of international retirement in 2014 and went straight back into the team. The most-capped Irish keeper.

8
0

Darren RANDOLPH

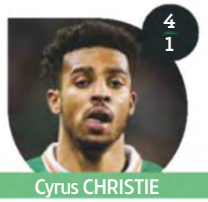
West Ham United (Eng)
Age 29 (12.05.87)
Born in Bray after his father, Ed Randolph, went to Ireland from the US to play professional basketball.

DEFENDERS

23
4

Robbie BRADY

Norwich City (Eng)
Age 24 (14.01.92)
No relation of Liam Brady, but they did both play for the same Dublin schoolboy club, St. Kevin's Boys.


4
1

Cyrus CHRISTIE

Derby County (Eng)
Age 23 (30.09.92)
Right-back, born in Coventry, he can trace relations back to Patrick Malone, who played for Shamrock Rovers in 1920s.

18
2

Ciaran CLARK

Aston Villa (Eng)
Age 26 (26.09.89)
Captained England under-19s and under-20s but both his parents have Irish connections. Debut v Wales in 2011.

33
0

Seamus COLEMAN

Everton (Eng)
Age 27 (11.10.88)
Didn't play seriously until he was 18, preferring Gaelic football in his native Donegal. Cost Everton €60,000.

2
0

Shane DUFFY

Blackburn Rovers (Eng)
Age 24 (01.01.92)
Underwent life-saving liver surgery in May 2010 after suffering a training-ground injury in Dublin.

11
1

Richard KEOGH

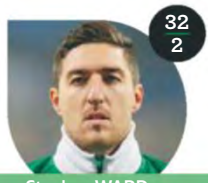
Derby County (Eng)
Age 29 (11.08.86)
English-born, his father has Carlow connections. Skippered the national side in a friendly against Oman.

110
3

John O'SHEA

Sunderland (Eng)
Age 35 (30.04.81)
Normally captain in Robbie Keane's absence, he was sent off when wearing the armband away to Poland in October.

MIDFIELDERS


32
2

Stephen WARD

Burnley (Eng)
Age 30 (20.08.85)
Striker at Bohemians, but switched by ex-Ireland boss Mick McCarthy to left-back when he joined Wolves.

1
0

Harry ARTER

Bournemouth (Eng)
Age 26 (28.12.89)
Qualifies through Sligo-born grandparents. Started at Charlton with Scott Parker, who is married to his sister.

18
0

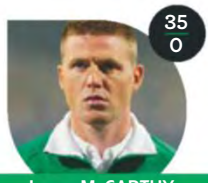
Jeff HENDRICK

Derby County (Eng)
Age 24 (31.01.92)
Played Gaelic football until 15, but soccer was always his first love. Overcame Osgood-Schlatter disease as a youth.

29
2

Wes HOOLAHAN

Norwich City (Eng)
Age 34 (20.05.82)
Won his first cap in Trapattoni's second game in charge and had to wait four-and-a-half years for his second.


35
0

James McCARTHY

Everton (Eng)
Age 25 (12.11.90)
The Glasgow-born midfielder who hasn't always impressed for Ireland. Missed Euro 2012 finals due to his father's illness.

36
5

James McCLEAN

West Bromwich Albion (Eng)
Age 27 (22.04.89)
Given his Premier League debut at Sunderland by Martin O'Neill. Due to get married on eve of the FA Cup Final.

81
5

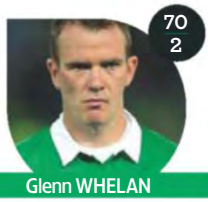
Aiden McGEADY

Everton (Eng)
Age 30 (04.04.86)
Scottish-born, played in Russia with Spartak Moscow. Joined Sheffield Wednesday on loan in February.

14
0

David MEYLER

Hull City (Eng)
Age 27 (29.05.89)
Father is a former inter-county hurler with Wexford and Cork and has managed senior inter-county hurling teams.


70
2

Glenn WHELAN

Stoke City (Eng)
Age 32 (13.01.84)
The Dubliner has his critics but was a regular under Trapattoni and continues to do a good holding job.

FORWARDS

143
67

Robbie KEANE

LA Galaxy (USA)
Age 35 (08.07.80)
Holds the Irish record for caps and goals, and has scored in every calendar year since 1998.

61
15

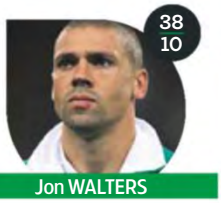
Shane LONG

Southampton (Eng)
Age 29 (22.01.87)
Only person to play minor hurling and international soccer at Croke Park. Played guitar on Euro 2012 song.

20
0

Daryl MURPHY

Ipswich Town (Eng)
Age 33 (15.03.83)
Played for Waterford United and followed ex-Ireland boss Mick McCarthy from Sunderland to Ipswich Town.


38
10

Jon WALTERS

Stoke City (Eng)
Age 32 (20.09.83)
Five goals in the qualifiers. Born on Merseyside, his late mother was from Dublin. His father is a big Everton fan.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

GOALKEEPER: Keiren Westwood (Sheffield Wednesday, Eng).

DEFENDERS: Paul McShane (Reading, Eng), Marc Wilson (Stoke City, Eng).

MIDFIELDERS: Stephen Gleeson (Birmingham City, Eng), Jonny Hayes (Aberdeen, Sco), Eunan O'Kane (Bournemouth, Eng), Anthony Pilkington (Cardiff City, Eng), Stephen Quinn (Reading, Eng).

FORWARD: Kevin Doyle (Colorado Rapids, USA).

Clinical... players such as winger Gabriel Torje will need to be on song for shot-shy Romania

THE VIEW FROM ROMANIA

"We can get past the group stage, of course. We have to concentrate on that. If we don't even think about it, how can we ever do it? We have to live with a winning mentality every day, we have to try our best. Every player has to prepare, to be ready and focused. We must

Slim pickings

Romania have few attacking options but are confident of springing a surprise

Romania are back in a big tournament after eight years of failed attempts, with Euro 2016 only their second appearance in a finals since Gheorghe Hagi retired in 2000. As such, anticipation is high, but it remains to be seen whether the current generation of players has what it takes to succeed in Europe.

Although they conceded just twice in their 10 qualifying games, numbers won't help Anghel Iordanescu's men in France this summer.

While group rivals France, Switzerland and Albania have varying problems of their own, Iordanescu's big concern is a loss of form and a worrying lack of playing time for those he considers to be his team leaders.

Vlad Chiriches (Napoli), Razvan Rat (Rayo Vallecano) and Alex Maxim (Stuttgart) are all having difficult club seasons. And things are made worse by a lack of home-based talent.

Romania scored just 11 goals in qualifying, against modest opposition, but the great Hagi remains confident, stating: "We still have talent, we are still an important nation with big players. We should play to be the best, to put up a fight against whoever we meet.

"If we're not there to be among the best, why go to France? Why should we consider ourselves inferior?"

Unfortunately, there's no sign of the quality and aura of Hagi's generation in today's squad. Above all, there is no one to honour his number 10 shirt. Adrian Ilie and Adrian Mutu stepped up after he retired in 2000, but the wearer has changed three times since 2014, demonstrating a serious crisis in the playmaker position.

And Romania's best player of the last 12 months didn't even make Iordanescu's draft squad earlier this year, the coach showing no remorse in dropping Constantin Budescu after his January 2016 move to the Chinese second tier. In fact, four of the five players who scored in qualifying, including Budescu, were omitted for the friendly matches in March.

A lack of attacking options is not Iordanescu's only worry ahead of the tournament. Even though statistics may make the defence look solid, Romania always looked likely to wobble when faced with strong opposition. Three of the four places at the back are still up for grabs, with Chiriches – a regular substitute in Serie A – being the only certainty to make the starting XI.

With more than 100 caps under his belt, captain Rat is also a concern. At 35, the former Shakhtar Donetsk and West Ham United left-back has missed four months of training due to injury and will find it hard to regain full fitness ahead of the Euros.

The *Tricolorii* may have many more doubts than certainties as they prepare for France, but they still hope to make the most of the opportunity. Despite their modest European record so far – only one win, against England in 2000, in 13 group-stage matches – Romania's game these days is based on absorbing pressure and keeping things as tight as possible for the opposition.

For the Romanians, frustration and excitement will go hand in hand at the Euros. Can it fire them into the last 16?

Emanuel Rosu

Anticipation... hopes are high among fans

> "If we're not there to be among the best, why go to France? Why should we consider ourselves inferior?"
>
> **Gheorghe Hagi**

play good football, because all our opponents are good and we have to get to their level."

Former Romania playmaker Gheorghe Hagi

"I can't see how we'll miss out on qualification from this group. We can qualify with three points. If we get four, there won't be any problem to seal a place in the next round."

Ex-international Dan Petrescu

Certain...Dan Petrescu

"What a good group. You can imagine my reaction in 2008, when I saw us in the same group as France, Italy and the Netherlands. I didn't show it, but I knew what my heart was yelling. We have to concentrate on the teams we're facing now, they are not easy, but losing against Albania is not the same as losing against the Netherlands."

Victor Piturca, former national coach

HOW THEY LINE UP

Few surprises in store

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

Romania will travel to France without any tactical surprises in store for their opponents in Group A, and that lack of adventure is due to Anghel Iordanescu's limited midfield options – as well as his renowned cautious approach.

Alternating between a 4-2-3-1 and a classic 4-4-2, the latter will probably be regarded as "plan A" only for the closing game in the group, against Albania.

Possession is likely to be conceded, with counter-attack being the main hope for a goal against France and Switzerland. It is how Romania set up all through the qualifying phase, even against teams such as Northern Ireland and Hungary.

Iordanescu has unanswered questions regarding seven of his starters for the opening game, against France on June 10.

Ciprian Tatarusanu in goal, Vlad Chiriches at centre-back, with Ovidiu Hoban and Mihai Pintilii as holding midfielders will all start, if fit. But apart from those four, all the other positions are up for grabs.

Starter... Mihai Pintilii will be one of the first names on the team-sheet for Romania

An injection of excitement may come from midfielder Nicolae Stanciu, who made his debut in the March friendly against Lithuania and was man of the match against Spain a few days later. He could start behind lone striker Florin Andone, who uses space well.

Iordanescu doesn't have many options on the flanks and is restricted to out of form, unfit or out-of-their-natural-position contenders. How well he can knit them together will determine his country's fate.

SCHEDULE

MAY 25
v **DR Congo** (F, Saint-Vincent Italy)
MAY 29
v **Ukraine** (F, Turin, Italy)
JUN 2
v **Georgia** (F, Bucharest, Romania)
JUN 10
v **France** (EC, Saint-Denis, France)
JUN 15
v **Switzerland** (EC, Paris, France)
JUN 19
v **Albania** (EC, Lyon, France)

THE COACH

ANGHEL IORDANESCU
Age 66 (04.05.50)
Named "coach of the century" by the Romanian FA after leading the country to the 1994 World Cup quarter-finals and a last-16 spot four years later. After quitting the sport in 2004 to pursue a career in politics, he was appointed national coach for a third time after previous incumbent Victor Piturca left the post in October 2014. He is expected to move into a technical-supervisor role after Euro 2016 and be replaced by one of his three assistant managers.

IORDANESCU IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"[The 2016 European Championship] will be completely different than anything many of my players have ever experienced."

"We're not favourites against anyone, we have to work and hope against each of the three group-stage opponents. France is a former world champion, Switzerland comes with fantastic pedigree, while Albania worked a lot in the past few years and made real progress."

"I never had the intention of again becoming Romania head coach [before being appointed in October 2014] and I have to be honest and say that I refused the first request made by the FA president. I said yes only at the second call, because I understood very well that Romanian football and its national team are now in a very special situation."

THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS

3 / 0

Silviu LUNG
Astra
Age 27 (04.06.89)
Agile and commanding, his father, also called Silviu Lung, played 77 times in goal for Romania.

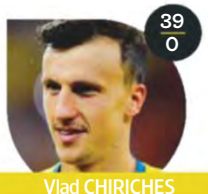
20 / 0

Costel PANTILIMON
Watford (Eng)
Age 29 (01.02.87)
Tallest goalkeeper in the Premier League, at 6ft 8in, but very agile. Lost the national spot to Tatarusanu in qualifying.

35 / 0

Ciprian TATARUSANU
Fiorentina (Ita)
Age 30 (09.02.86)
A handball goalkeeper during his schooldays, he kept seven clean sheets in qualifying. Excellent in one-on-ones.

DEFENDERS


39 / 0

Vlad CHIRICHES
Napoli (Ita)
Age 26 (14.11.89)
The best Romanian defender of his era. Started with Benfica, returning home after a career-threatening injury.

3 / 0

Steliano FILIP
Dinamo Bucharest
Age 22 (15.05.94)
Began as a winger and still has to improve his defensive contribution. Made his debut against Italy in November.

13 / 1

Valerica GAMAN
Astra
Age 27 (25.02.89)
Tall and a good user of the ball, the central defender sees Euro 2016 as a stepping stone to a transfer to a bigger club.

18 / 0

Dragos GRIGORE
Al Sailiya (Qat)
Age 29 (07.09.86)
Partnered Chiriches throughout qualifying but feared his international career was over after moving to Qatar.

7 / 0

Cosmin MOTI
Ludogorets (Bul)
Age 31 (03.12.84)
Has a stand named after him at his club after going in goal and saving two penalties in a Champions League shoot-out.

108 / 2

Razvan RAT
Rayo Vallecano (Spa)
Age 35 (26.05.81)
Left-back and regular captain who hopes to recover from a shoulder injury that sidelined him for four months.

11 / 0

Cristian SAPUNARU
Pandurii Targu Jiu
Age 32 (05.04.84)
A right-back, he can also play in central defence or midfield. Refused to play under ex-coach Victor Piturca.

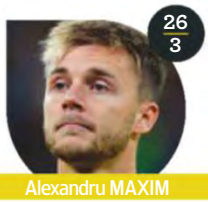
MIDFIELDERS

20 / 3

Alexandru CHIPCIU
Steaua Bucharest
Age 27 (18.05.89)
Can play on the wing, behind the striker, or as a false nine. Has struggled with a series of injuries.

18 / 1

Ovidiu HOBAN
Hapoel Be'er Sheva (Isr)
Age 33 (27.12.82)
Won his first cap at the age of 31 and is now one of the team's leaders. Has played everywhere except in goal.


26 / 3

Alexandru MAXIM
Stuttgart (Ger)
Age 25 (08.07.90)
Has vision and creative ability going forward, but has been limited to a substitute's role in Germany this term.

29 / 1

Mihai PINTILII
Steaua Bucharest
Age 31 (09.11.84)
Defensive midfielder who is one of Iordanescu's favourites. Rejoined Steaua in January after time with Hapoel Tel Aviv.

11 / 0

Adrian POPA
Steaua Bucharest
Age 27 (24.07.88)
Nicknamed "The Motorcycle". He grew up as a Steaua fan, and joined the club from Concordia Chiajna in 2012.

6 / 0

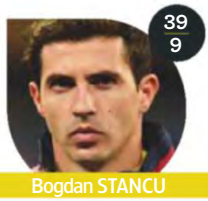
Adrian ROPOTAN
Pandurii Targu Jiu
Age 30 (08.05.86)
Tough-tackling, hard working central midfielder. Recently moved to title-chasing Pandurii from struggling Petrolul.

18 / 0

Lucian SANMARTEAN
Al Ittihad (Sau)
Age 36 (13.03.80)
Failed to fulfil his potential because of injuries and a loss of confidence. Almost retired five years ago.

2 / 1

Nicolae STANCIU
Steaua Bucharest
Age 23 (07.05.93)
Scored on his debut, against Lithuania, in March. An exciting prospect, Steaua value him at around €10m.


39 / 9

Bogdan STANCU
Genclerbirligi (Tur)
Age 28 (28.06.87)
Gheorghe Hagi took him to Galatasaray, but he failed to make the grade. A wide man who can also play up front.

48 / 10

Gabriel TORJE
Osmanlispor (Tur)
Age 26 (22.11.89)
Speedy winger who was bought by Udinese to replace Alexis Sanchez after they sold the Chilean to Barcelona.

FORWARDS

1 / 0

Denis ALIBEC
Astra
Age 25 (05.01.91)
Bought by Internazionale as a teenager, but failed to hit the heights. Poised to move to Steaua this summer.

5 / 1

Florin ANDONE
Cordoba (Spa)
Age 23 (11.04.93)
Right-footed forward who moved to Spain when he was 12 and has never played for a Romanian club at senior level.

10 / 4

Claudiu KESERU
Ludogorets (Bul)
Age 29 (02.12.86)
Prolific goalscorer who played in France and Qatar. Good at finding space and creating chances.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

DEFENDERS: Alexandru Matel (Dinamo Zagreb, Cro), Paul Papp (Steaua Bucharest), Gabriel Tamas (Steaua Bucharest), Alin Tosca (Steaua Bucharest).

MIDFIELDERS: Eric Bicfalvi (Dinamo Bucharest), Andrei Prepelita (Ludogorets, Bul).

FORWARDS: Ioan Hora (Pandurii Targu Jiu), Andrei Ivan (Universitatea Craiova), Ciprian Marica (Steaua Bucharest), Raul Rusescu (Osmanlispor, Tur).

New blood

'Naturalizatsiya' – non-Russians – have boosted an ageing squad

While the bulk of Russia's squad will be drawn from those who ensured qualification, there will almost certainly be one or two history-making additions.

In March, Lokomotiv Moscow's Brazilian-born goalkeeper Guilherme became the first non-Russian to be capped by the national side – and he may not be the last.

The word "naturalizatsiya" – which involves giving citizenship to non-Russian players to enable them to represent the national team – has become common of late. It is a practice that has been widely used in futsal, in which Russia occupies a leading global position thanks to a number of naturalised Brazilians. And it is one that Leonid Slutsky seems keen to replicate in the 11-a-side game.

Guilherme was fast-tracked into the national set-up after receiving clearance late last year and the coach now looks to have his sights set on Schalke midfielder Roman Neustadter, whose parents left the Soviet Union for Germany when he was a kid. Capped twice in friendlies by Germany and also eligible for Ukraine, Neustadter says he is not ready to give up his German passport but will await "a special decision" from the Russian government, which may grant him a double citizenship and a place in the Russian squad.

Krasnodar striker Ari, who was born in Brazil and married a Russian after joining Spartak Moscow in January 2010, has also applied for a Russian passport and indicated he would be interested in getting involved. Slutsky, however, is only likely to turn to the 30-year-old in case of injuries.

However, the idea of rubbing shoulders with "new compatriots" is not overly popular with some of Russia's senior players and the national team's goalkeeping coach, Sergei Ovchinnikov, has openly objected the idea.

One of the most discussed figures prior to the finals has been another "foreigner" in the shape of Aleksandr Kerzhakov, one of only two overseas-based players likely to be going to France.

The country's all-time leading goalscorer was loaned to the Swiss side Zurich by Zenit, where Portuguese coach Andre Villas-Boas kept him not only out of the squad but also away from the club's training ground due to a personal conflict. Eager to make an international comeback, Kerzhakov scored four goals in his first seven games for Zurich in Switzerland before getting injured.

Exciting winger Denis Cheryshev, who has been on loan at Valencia from Real Madrid, would have been handed a place in the 23 if not for his serious injury in March, and his absence means Russia's attacking hopes will rest with striker Artem Dzyuba – so long as he is fit and motivated – and captain Roman Shirokov in midfield.

> Guilherme was fast-tracked into the national set-up and the coach now has his sights set on Roman Neustadter

The ageing defence has been deemed a worry for years but no alternative has yet been found for its central pivot of CSKA pair Sergei Ignashevich and Vasili Berezutski. With non-Russians occupying the central-defensive positions in most of the county's leading club sides, it is not unthinkable that the pair may still be there for the 2018 World Cup.

While a play-off place this summer may be regarded as a must, there is little talk of further progress in the tournament. And any comparison with the Russian team that reached the Euro semi-finals in 2008 does not favour today's squad.

Victor Gusev

Preparation...Aleksandr Kokorin (no9) in action on French soil in March against the Euro hosts

Hope...Artem Dzyuba

THE VIEW FROM RUSSIA

"Russia's powerful style of play is similar to that of all three group rivals in the Euros, which makes life easier for our team. It is traditionally more difficult for Russia to play against teams like Spain, where the emphasis has to be on ball control. We have a good chance of reaching the second stage, which in itself would be a good result as Russia has had little success in recent competitions. Further progress will depend on

Easier...Gershkovich

who is our next opponent and luck."

Mikhail Gershkovich, ex-USSR striker and former assistant coach of Russia

"Russia does not look like a team able to qualify for the knockout stage, although with Zenit and CSKA providing the majority of the national team it makes it easier for Slutsky to find balance between the lines and produce coherent play. No squad in the group seems unbeatable, but with no world-class stars the Russian coach must rely upon the experience of Ignashevich (36), Vasili Berezutski (33) and Akinfeev (30) in his back line. Then there is the new CSKA playmaker Shirokov (34) and Dynamo's holding midfielder Denisov (32). I am not sure that 25-year-old 'youngsters' Kokorin and Shatov are ready to show their best in the highest level tournament. Hopefully, Dzagoev – the best Russian player at the previous Euro finals – will try not to miss another chance to please the big European clubs."

Konstantin Kleschev, editor-in-chief of Sovetsky Sport daily

U-turn...Igor Rabiner

"It will surely be a success if Russia reaches the second stage. There is no talented football generation in Russia now, however Slutsky himself is a very talented coach. Having replaced Fabio Capello, he managed to make a U-turn like no one before him here in the last 10 years. A strong tactician, he – unlike his predecessor – is a very good communicator with the squad. To sum it up, getting past the group stage would be good; anything extra is excellent."

Igor Rabiner, Sport Express daily football

HOW THEY LINE UP

CSKA and Zenit form national nucleus

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

For the most part, Russia will rely on two club sides for the bulk of their starting line-up in France, with CSKA providing the spine and Zenit the width.

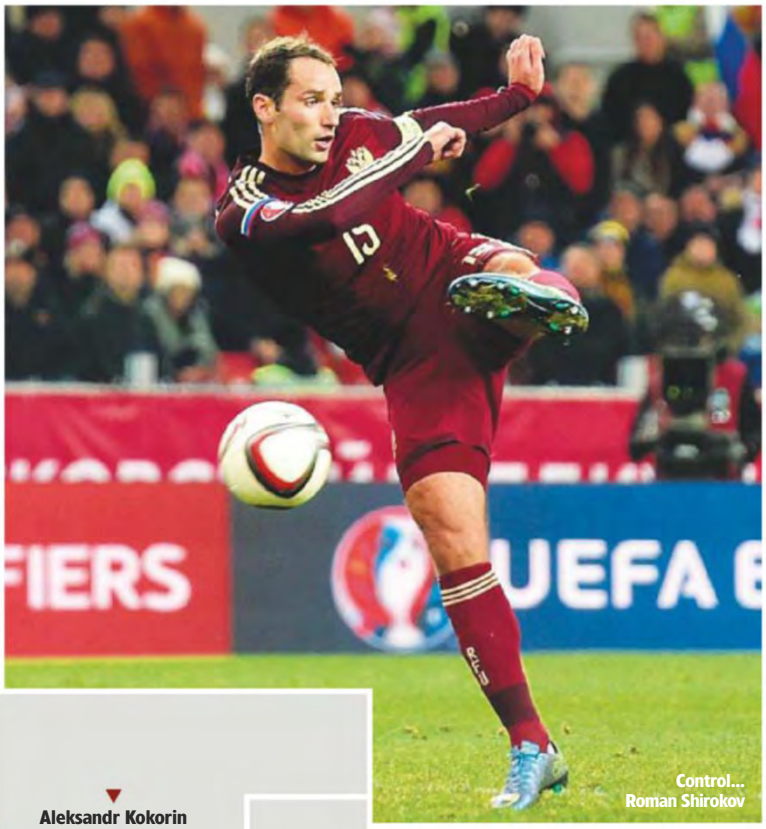
Despite a few worries of late, Igor Akinfeev's position between the posts is assured and he will have the reassuring sight of club-mates Sergei Ignashevich and Vasili Berezutski in front of him. Although not the quickest pairing, they will dominate in the air and provide a threat in the opposition penalty area at set-pieces.

Zenit wing-backs Igor Smolnikov and Yuri Zhirkov will spend a lot of time in attack, so Igor Denisov will be relied upon to protect the central defenders and break-up counter-attacks.

Alan Dzagoev's holding responsibilities will not prevent him from pushing forward whenever possible, while Oleg Shatov will drift in from the flank to join him and Roman Shirokov in controlling the game from the centre of the pitch.

Leonid Slutsky's preferred 4-2-3-1 set-up could change into a 4-1-3-2 if Aleksandr Kokorin joins his Zenit strike partner Artem Dzyuba up front. This change could see Dmitri Kombarov come in at left-back with Zhirkov moving further forward as a more conventional winger.

On the bench, there is experienced Oleg Kuzmin as back-up for Smolnikov, while Dmitri Tarasov or Pavel Mamaev can help to protect the back four. Aleksandr Kerzhakov and Fedor Smolov are good attacking options, while Alexander Samedov is an alternative on the right.



Control... Roman Shirokov

SCHEDULE

JUN 1
v **Czech Republic** (F, Innsbruck, Austria)
JUN 5
v **Serbia** (F, Switzerland)
JUN 11
v **England** (EC, Marseille, France)
JUN 26
v **Slovakia** (EC, Lille, France)
JUN 20
v **Wales** (EC, Toulouse, France)

THE COACH

LEONID SLUTSKY
Age 45 (04.05.71)
Once dubbed the "Russian Mourinho" for his coaching talent and charisma, he is a media favourite who is happy to take part in comedy shows and is big fan of the theatre. Currently combining the national job with that of CSKA coach, he will have to make a choice between the two after the Euro finals. His brief playing career as a goalkeeper was ended by a spine injury he suffered while trying to get a cat down from a tree. Has a habit of swinging on the bench during games.

SLUTSKY IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"Never considered myself to be a lucky man."

"There are no age limits for improving one's technical and tactical skills. I know many cases when a 28-year-old player progressed much faster than an 18-year-old."

"We have a task of advancing from our group in France. And then we will go step by step. Our further progress will largely depend on who we get as a last-16 opponent."

"People from the Russian Football Union asked CSKA if the club would let me be the national-team coach, combining the two posts. I could not refuse because of the difficult situation Russia found itself in the qualifiers."

THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS

86
0

Igor AKINFEEV
CSKA Moscow
Age 30 (08.04.86)
First choice for a dozen years despite errors such as the goal v South Korea in the 2014 World Cup.

1
0

GUILHERME
Lokomotiv Moscow
Age 30 (12.12.85)
Born in Brazil, he became the first player born outside Russia to be capped when making his debut v Lithuania in March.

10
0

Yuri LODYGIN
Zenit
Age 26 (26.05.90)
Born in Russia but moved to his mother's Greek homeland aged 10 and capped by Greece at under-21 level.

DEFENDERS

57
0

Alexei BEREZUTSKI
CSKA Moscow
Age 33 (20.06.82)
Back-up for both club and country although his presence is said to benefit the team spirit of both.

93
4

Vasili BEREZUTSKI
CSKA Moscow
Age 33 (20.06.82)
Older than his twin brother Alexei by 20 minutes, he is not the quickest central defender but is good in the air.

115
8

Sergei IGNASHEVICH
CSKA Moscow
Age 36 (14.07.79)
Russia's most-capped player of all time, the centre-half compensates for lack of speed with his reading of the game.

38
2

Dmitri KOMBAROV
Spartak Moscow
Age 29 (22.01.87)
Attacking left-back who can also play wide in midfield. His twin brother Kirill is also on Spartak's books.

5
1

Oleg KUZMIN
Rubin Kazan
Age 35 (09.05.81)
Right-back who can also play on the left. Possesses pace and a good shot. Made his debut last year. aged 34.

12
0

Igor SMOLNIKOV
Zenit
Age 27 (08.08.88)
Pacy, attacking right-back who is one of the Russian league's top performers since moving from Krasnodar to in 2013.

28
2

Dmitri TORBINSKI
Krasnodar
Age 32 (28.04.84)
Midfielder converted to a defender, he scored the winning goal against Holland in the Euro 2008 quarter-finals.

MIDFIELDERS

68
2

Yuri ZHIRKOV
Zenit
Age 32 (20.08.83)
Left-back or winger. Member of the Russia team that reached the semi-finals of Euro 2008.

52
0

Igor DENISOV
Dynamo Moscow
Age 32 (17.05.84)
Has had run-ins with his several of his coaches and refused a late call-up to the Euro 2008 squad.

49
9

Alan DZAGOEV
CSKA Moscow
Age 25 (17.06.90)
Russia's best player at Euro 2012 but has since moved from the role of playmaker to holding midfielder.

3
0

Oleg IVANOV
Terek Grozny
Age 29 (04.08.86)
In bronze-medal winning squad at Euro 2008 but didn't make his international debut until seven years later.

10
0

Pavel MAMAEV
Krasnodar
Age 27 (17.09.88)
Heavily tattooed creative midfielder who was reported to be on his way to Manchester United in 2012.

28
3

Alexander SAMEDOV
Lokomotiv Moscow
Age 31 (19.07.84)
Right-winger who opted to represent Russia after being courted by Azerbaijan, his father's country of birth.

21
2

Oleg SHATOV
Zenit
Age 25 (29.07.90)
A former futsal player who is considered to be one of the Russian league's most technically skilled players.

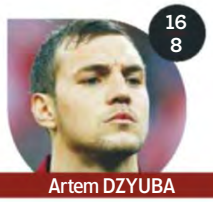
53
13

Roman SHIROKOV
CSKA Moscow
Age 34 (06.07.81)
National captain, he joined CSKA on a six-month deal in February after his contract with Spartak was cancelled.

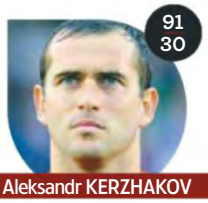
3
1

Dmitri TARASOV
Lokomotiv Moscow
Age 29 (18.03.87)
Central midfielder who caused controversy in February with a T-shirt in support of Vladimir Putin.

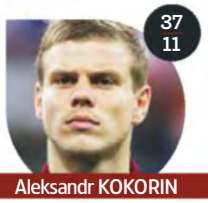
FORWARDS


16
8

Artem DZYUBA
Zenit
Age 27 (22.08.88)
Powerful centre-forward who is strong in the air and was Russia's top scorer during qualifying.


91
30

Aleksandr KERZHAKOV
Zenit
Age 33 (27.11.82)
Russia leading goalscorer, he joined Zurich in Switzerland on loan this year after struggling for first-team football at Zenit.


37
11

Aleksandr KOKORIN
Zenit
Age 25 (19.03.91)
Yet to live up to the hype, but Slutsky has faith in him still – especially after his January move from Dynamo to Zenit.

12
5

Fedor SMOLOV
Krasnodar
Age 26 (09.02.90)
Joined Krasnodar last year after spells on loan at Feyenoord and Anzhi while with Dynamo.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

GOALKEEPERS: Soslan Dzhanayev (Rostov), Stanislav Kritsyuk (Braga, Por).

DEFENDER: Ivan Novoseltsev (Rostov).

MIDFIELDERS: Aleksandr Golovin (CSKA Moscow), Denis Glushakov (Spartak Moscow), Vladislav Ignatyev (Lokomotiv Moscow), Ilya Maksimov (Anzhi), Artur Yusupov (Zenit).

FORWARD: Aleksei Ionov (Dynamo Moscow).

Spring in their step

Having beaten Italy at the 2010 World Cup, another upset is possible

England's last group game opponents, Slovakia reached their first Euro finals on merit and Jan Kozak, who was brought in halfway through a previous qualifying campaign, has created a motivated mix of home-based and major-league players.

Alongside Martin Skrtel (Liverpool), Peter Pekarik (Hertha Berlin) and Marek Hamsik (Napoli), his squad also features players from Ruzomberok, Zilina and Slovan Bratislava.

Soon after Kozak's arrival, a late Latvia equaliser in October 2013 closed Slovakia's involvement with the 2014 World Cup. However, the new man had already lined up five friendlies and was targeting the first two Euro 2016 qualifying games as paramount.

Taking his squad from Israel to St Petersburg, Kozak aimed to create the kind of team spirit that had enabled Slovakia to beat Italy 3-2 at the 2010 World Cup – their only previous appearance at a major finals.

Those preparatory games initiated a streak of 12 wins in 13 games. And when it came to the crunch opening Euro 2016 qualifiers, Slovakia beat Ukraine in Kiev and then ended Spain's 37-game, eight-year run of defeat-free qualifying campaigns with a 2-1 win in Zilina.

With one foot in France after only 180 minutes of football, Slovakia had bonded. In front of an inspired Matus Kozacik in goal, the resilient centre-back partnership of Jan Durica and Norbert Gyomber had proved that Slovakia could withstand long periods of pressure even without captain Martin Skrtel.

But the real revelation was Juraj Kucka, a veteran of the 2010 campaign. He consistently broke down moves and set up counter-attacks, scoring the opener against Spain. In front of Kucka, Hamsik roamed the space between midfield and penalty box. Top scorer in the qualifying group, at 28 he is at the peak of his game.

Having got off to a dream start, by the autumn of 2015, Slovakia lost to Spain and Belarus, and Kozak had to lift the team again after a 0-0 draw at home to Latvia.

Without Kucka in midfield against Latvia, Slovakia looked pedestrian. Kozak has brought through Jan Gregus and Patrik Hrosovsky from the under-21 set-up, but there's no firebrand youngster desperate to prove themselves in the shop window of the Euros. Vladimir Weiss, for example, was only 20 when he shone in South Africa in 2010 and was on Manchester City's books. Still in the national set-up but now based in Qatar, he has had a wayward club career since.

On the plus side, the Slovaks work hard for each other. Adam Nemec is far from prolific but his dedication to the cause is exemplary, while Robert Mak is revered for his tireless runs from the right flank.

Half the team who beat Italy in 2010 will be in France. With little expected of them, Slovakia could surprise many again.

Peterjon Cresswell

Warm-up...Miroslav Stoch (no10) opened the scoring in March's friendly against Republic of Ireland

> Marek Hamsik roams the space between midfield and penalty box. At 28, he is at the peak of his game

THE VIEW FROM SLOVAKIA

"Our big advantage is that we have nothing to lose. Our group is demanding but there is no killer team, such as Spain, and our games are likely to be tight. Any team with Hamsik and Skrtel is capable of picking up three or four points and advancing, even in third place. The only precondition, though, is fitness and injuries – as a squad, we're pretty thin."

Mojmir Stasko, Dennik Sport

Patience...Merciak

"Our players gained a lot of confidence during the qualifying process. Jan Kozak has brought confidence and patience, and the team is happy to follow him. Kozak has always been known as a coach who loves to play football and create, not to destroy. His teams play on the deck, with nice passing combinations. We will be there to enjoy one of the greatest moments of our football in the last 25 years."

Marcel Merciak, Head of Sports, Radio & Television Slovakia

"Slovakia are newcomers to the Euros but I don't think we will be also-rans. In beating Spain and Ukraine, Kozak's team showed courage and consistency during qualification. Slovakia performed with great spirit and were tactically disciplined, both as a team and individually. For me, England are the group favourites, but Slovakia should be equal to Russia and Wales. I think the round of 16 should be a realistic aim."

Ladislav Harsanyi, Aktualne.sk

Debut...Erik Sabo hopes to be part of Slovakia's historic first Euros

HOW THEY LINE UP

Solid experience but little from the bench

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

Slovakia's biggest strength is their solid, experienced defence, which has been set in stone for years, with a back four that has more than 250 caps between them.

Behind them, keeper Matus Kozacik rarely makes a mistake, with the opposition often reduced to long-range shots that allow him to make showboating saves.

With this foundation, coach Jan Kozak can build a midfield and attack in various combinations – usually a defensive two, an attacking three and a lone striker.

Slovakia's other main asset is their workmanlike midfield. Viktor Pecovsky and Juraj Kucka are always prepared to track back and carry out a lot of the unseen work, which allows star man Marek Hamsik space to push forward.

Slovakia are also blessed with quick wide men, most notably Robert Mak, while lone striker Adam Nemec will give opposing defenders something to think about. Although he is far from prolific, Nemec will be on hand to set up the oncoming Hamsik, Mak or Vladimir Weiss.

With most of the team in their late twenties or over, Kozak will have to think about using his substitutes wisely in the heat of France. And it's here that Slovakia may struggle as they have no obvious impact youngster to bring on to scare tiring opponents for the last 15 minutes.

On the plus side, many of Kozak's key men played against Italy and Holland in the 2010 World Cup and know what it's like to maintain top-level concentration against the world's best for an entire 90 minutes. It's not often that the back four and defensive midfield pairing are caught out of position.

Quick...Robert Mak

SCHEDULE

MAY 27
v **Georgia** (F, Linz, Austria)
MAY 29
v **Germany** (F, Augsburg, Germany)
JUN 4
v **Northern Ireland** (F, Trnava, Slovakia)
JUN 11
v **Wales** (EC, Bordeaux, France)
JUN 15
v **Russia** (EC, Lille, France)
JUN 20
v **England** (EC, Saint-Etienne, France)

THE COACH

JAN KOZAK
Age 62 (17.04.54)
Went to Euro 80 and the 1982 World Cup as a midfielder with Czechoslovakia and coached Kosice in Champions League games against Manchester United and Juventus. With his excellent contacts in the Czech Republic, his squad features more players based north of the border than in Slovakia. He's also able to motivate stars such as Marek Hamsik and Juraj Kucka to perform as well for their country as they do for their clubs, and has been given a contract extension until November 2017.

KOZAK IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"I've been involved in football all my life. I started at the Faculty of Electrical Engineering. I gave it a term then I'd had enough."

"I wouldn't say I was a workaholic, but I devoted hours and hours every day to football, watching too many matches, analysing and preparing with my staff for the next game."

"I will try to give other players their opportunity, there's always room to try things, but I'm already aware of the strength and quality of the main XI."

"When I took this job, I had to take risks because I didn't have the best reputation in all quarters. I hope that with my honest work I've repaid everyone who believed in me."

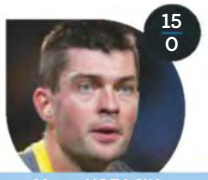
THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

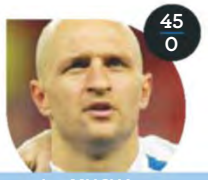
GOALKEEPERS

1
0

Martin DUBRAVKA
Esbjerg (Den)
Age 27 (05.01.89)
Limited playing time despite a good stint for the under-21s and twice winning the league with Zilina.

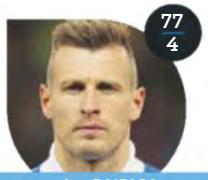

15
0

Matus KOZACIK
Viktoria Plzen (CzR)
Age 32 (27.12.83)
Now first choice, had played just 45 minutes of international football – 10 years ago – before the qualifiers.


45
0

Jan MUCHA
Slovan Bratislava
Age 33 (05.12.82)
A hero of the 2010 World Cup. Likes snowboarding in the mountains and also has a pilot's licence.

DEFENDERS


77
4

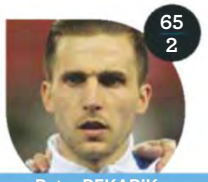
Jan DURICA
Lokomotiv Moscow (Rus)
Age 34 (10.12.81)
A mainstay in the central defence since 2004, he played in Petrzalka's 5-0 win against Celtic in 2005.

12
0

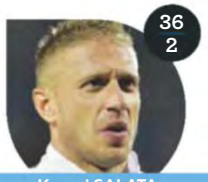
Norbert GYOMBER
Catania (Ita)
Age 23 (03.07.92)
On loan at Roma, his name is pronounced "Jum-bear: and is a Hungarian family name meaning "ginger".

44
0

Tomas HUBOCAN
Dynamo Moscow (Rus)
Age 30 (17.09.85)
Replaced Skrtel at Dynamo in 2008 and scored an own goal in his European debut for the club.


65
2

Peter PEKARIK
Hertha Berlin (Ger)
Age 29 (30.10.86)
Right-back for 10 years, he won the Bundesliga in his first season abroad, with Wolfsburg in 2009.


36
2

Kornel SALATA
Slovan Bratislava
Age 31 (24.01.85)
A veteran of the World Cup campaign. Born on the Slovak-Hungarian border but opted against playing for Hungary.

79
5

Martin SKRTEL
Liverpool (Eng)
Age 31 (15.12.84)
Captain known as "The Terminator" he is ruthlessly competitive and scores the occasional spectacular volley.

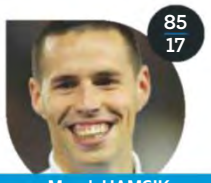
36
1

Dusan SVENTO
Cologne (Ger)
Age 30 (01.08.85)
Left-sided defender or midfielder and a squad member for a decade. Czech and Austrian league winner.

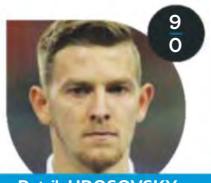
3
0

Lukas TESAK
Kairat (Kaz)
Age 31 (08.03.85)
Can also play in midfield. Made his international debut in his 30s – against European champions Spain.

MIDFIELDERS


85
17

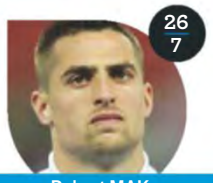
Marek HAMSIK
Napoli (Ita)
Age 28 (27.07.87)
Slovakia's poster boy, he left his homeland for Italy aged barely 17 and after just six games for Slovan Bratislava.


9
0

Patrik HROSOVSKY
Viktoria Plzen (CzR)
Age 24 (22.04.92)
Attacking midfield who, as a six-year-old, joined Prievidza, where Kucka and Skrtel played as teenagers.

45
4

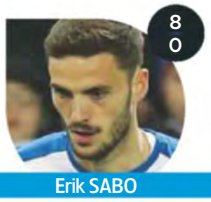
Juraj KUCKA
Milan (Ita)
Age 29 (26.02.87)
Links defence and attack. Played just one minute of tournament football before starting against Italy in 2010 World Cup.


26
7

Robert MAK
PAOK (Gre)
Age 25 (08.03.91)
Right-sided attacker-cum-midfielder who, as a teenager, played with Vladimir Weiss in Man City's youth academy.

30
1

Viktor PECOVSKY
Zilina
Age 33 (24.05.83)
Right-sided midfielder who had to wait until he was 29 to make his debut but has been near ever-present since.


8
0

Erik SABO
PAOK (Gre)
Age 24 (22.11.91)
Former under-21, he played for the Spartak side from the tiny village of Myjava that reached Slovakia's top flight.

63
13

Stanislav SESTAK
Ferencvaros (Hun)
Age 33 (16.12.82)
A title winner a decade ago with Zilina and now a champion in Hungary this term. Can play as wide midfielder or in attack.

52
6

Miroslav STOCH
Fenerbahce (Tur)
Age 26 (19.10.89)
Already has seven years international experience, ex-Chelsea player who is on loan at Bursaspor in Turkey.

50
4

VLADIMIR WEISS
Al Gharafa (Qat)
Age 26 (30.11.89)
Made his breakthrough at the 2010 World Cup – under coach Vladimir Weiss, who is his father.

FORWARDS

23
3

MICHAL DURIS
Viktoria Plzen (CzR)
Age 28 (01.06.88)
Top scorer for Czech league leaders Viktoria Plzen this term, he is yet to score in a competitive international.

20
4

Adam NEMEC
Willem II (Hol)
Age 30 (02.09.85)
Usurped Vittek during qualifying, he had a short and disappointing stint at New York City FC last year.

82
23

Robert VITTEK
Slovan Bratislava
Age 34 (01.04.82)
Seeing out his career where it started, at Slovan. He is his country's all-time record goalscorer.

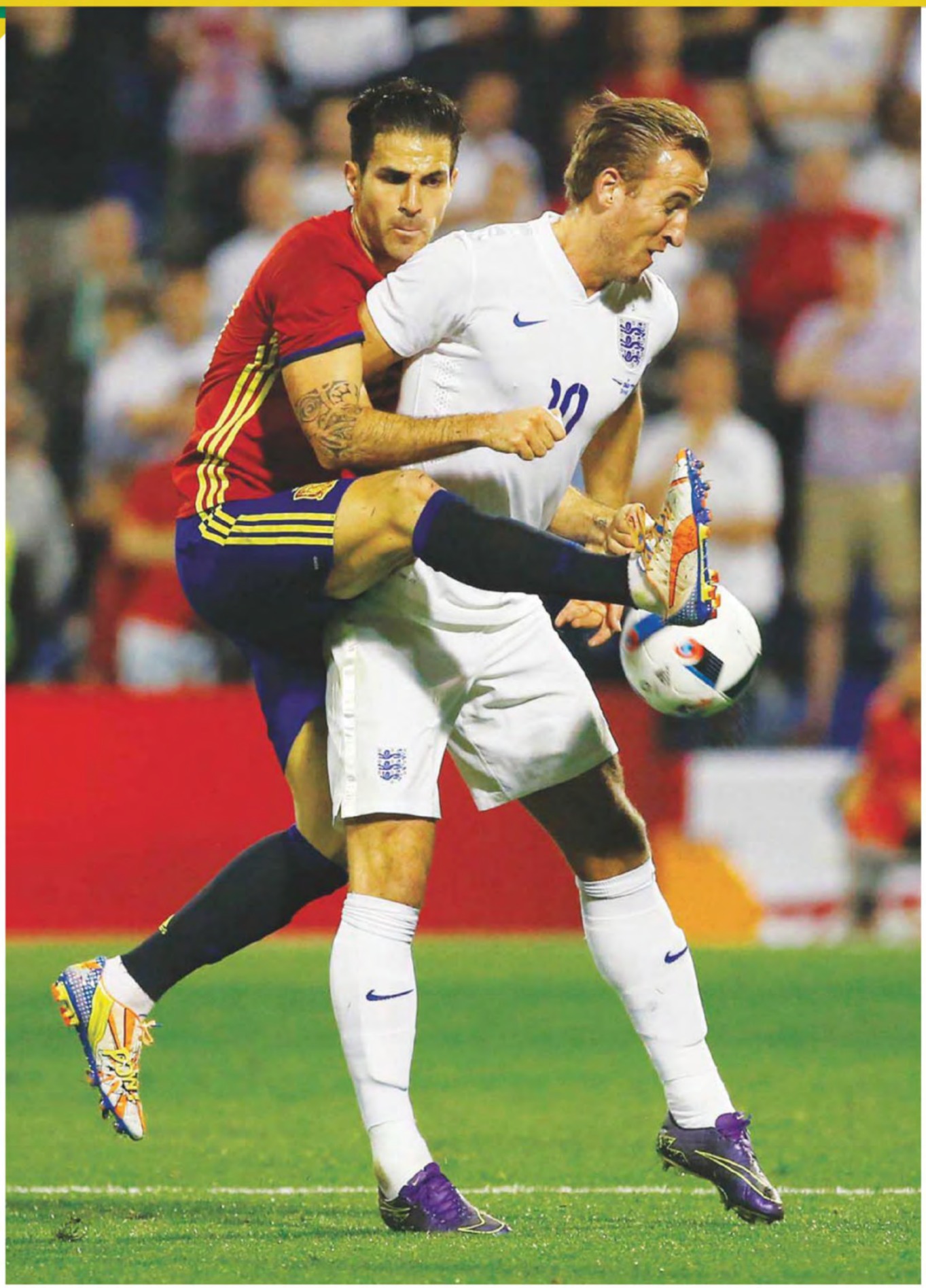
ALSO IN CONTENTION

GOALKEEPER: Jan Novotna (Rapid Vienna, Aut).

DEFENDERS: Matus Conka (Spartak Trnava), Patrik Mraz (Piast Gliwice, Pol).

MIDFIELDERS: Ondrej Duda (Legia Warsaw, Pol), Jan Gregus (Jablonec, CzR), Karim Guede (Freiburg, Ger).

FORWARDS: Martin Jakubko (Ruzomberok), Jakub Sylvestr (Nuremberg, Ger)



Challenge...Cesc Fabregas (left) gets to grips with England's Harry Kane

Gloom despite the talent

The champions appear resigned to missing a recordbreaking treble

"It's not so bad," Vicente Del Bosque said. Spain had just played their last two friendlies before the coach named his squad for France and he was keen to calm people down. But the very fact that he felt he had to was telling. It was telling, too, that in an interview a few days before, he had reminded people that Spain are the defending European champions.

If Spain were to win this summer, they would complete an historic hat-trick of consecutive European titles – but there is little optimism that they will. As world champions, they were the first team to be knocked out of the 2014 World Cup in Brazil. Del Bosque talked about the need to carry out a "soft transition", while others saw things in more dramatic terms: an era had ended at the Maracana and it is not coming back.

On one level, that appears an odd conclusion to draw. Xavi and Xabi Alonso have retired from international football, and David Villa has departed for the USA, but Spain still have a hugely impressive collection of players, many of whom have won it all. Gerard Pique, Sergio Ramos, Sergio Busquets, Andres Iniesta and David Silva would be cause for optimism in most countries. Despite an early wobble, ultimately they qualified comfortably for France, too.

It is also worth noting that Del Bosque could point to mitigating factors after the two uninspiring draws against Italy and Romania. The games took place in the week before the *classico* in Spain, it was only a friendly, rotations seemed driven more by the concerns of the clubs than the country, and there were several key players missing.

"I think – no, I am sure – that we will improve when Busquets and Iniesta and another are available," Del Bosque said. "Another" might have been little more than a turn of phrase, and it sounds less odd in Spanish than it does in English, but it was intriguing to ask who he might have meant and what that might mean for the final squad. Diego Costa? Santi Cazorla?

That Spain missed Iniesta and Busquets was inescapable. In this post-Xavi era, they more than anyone else represent the Spanish style that, it seemed, had not only made history but also provided a path to follow in the future. Without them, Spain didn't look like Spain: the passing lacked the pace and precision that once characterised them and chances were few. Against Italy, they had just three attempts on target and against Romania, four – their lowest totals since the World Cup.

The reviews were pessimistic and *Marca* said "it would have been better not to even play these friendlies", adding that Spain had "no identity".

Are the greatest puritans of all losing their religion? Del Bosque had talked about the desirability of quicker transitions, of breaking swiftly, and going longer at times, but he had not meant at the cost of what they had done so well for so long.

"We expected more," the coach admitted. Spain lacked spark, freshness, an apparent sense of purpose, edge, creativity and speed. There are doubts too, in key positions. None of the forwards have convinced in a role that was always a difficult one with this style.

And yet look at Spain's team again and the talent is certainly there. Maybe, as Del Bosque said, it's not so bad.

"It is true; it wasn't good," Juan Mata said. "But there are two months to go still and I am sure we will be OK for the Euros."

Sid Lowe

Draw...Aritz Aduriz (below) scores against Italy

> "We will improve when Busquets and Iniesta and another are available"
> **Vicente Del Bosque**

THE VIEW FROM SPAIN

"Spain's challenge is to replace fundamental players like Xavi, Xabi Alonso and Villa, but they are not at all clear who will play those vital roles. If they are to go beyond the last 16 they need Iniesta and Busquets to be at their best. Reaching the semi-finals would be a success."
Rodrigo Errasti, El Correo

Unclear...Rodrigo Errasti

"Spain's style still exists. Now, it's up to the manager and his players to make it work."
Ladislao Monino, El Pais

"Spain have two handicaps. Firstly, winning three titles in a row is almost impossible. Secondly, some of the new generation are not yet leading the team in a way needed to beat the other contenders."
Juan Castro Nogales, Marca

HOW THEY LINE UP

Del Bosque may mix it up

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

Few countries have been as recognisable as Spain in recent years, and most of the qualities that made them what they are remain – even if they are a little further below the surface now.

Vicente Del Bosque has talked about the importance of releasing longer balls more quickly, of being able to play on the counter-attack, of a willingness to mix the game up. However, the risk might be, as recent performances suggest, that that comes at the cost of losing their essence.

In theory, the desire to control games remains the same, but there are doubts about the formation.

Will they play 4-3-3 or 4-2-3-1 or even 4-1-4-1? Will they play one striker or two? Four years ago, they played with none, but Del Bosque has all but ruled that out this time. Which forwards will they play? Which kind of forwards, in fact? Will the width come from wingers or from full-backs?

Injuries and availability also have an impact, of course. Will Thiago Alcantara be fully fit? Will Santi Cazorla make it in time? Could Javi Martinez still play a part?

Sergio Busquets will anchor the midfield, but he may not do so alone. His partner, if Spain opt for two deeper central midfielders could be Koke, Thiago or Cazorla. In front of them, or perhaps to the side, Iniesta is vital.

Up front, an experiment with Aritz Aduriz and Alvaro Morata was reasonably positive, but two attacking midfielders seems more likely. Paco Alcacer and Diego Costa have had difficult seasons, while Del Bosque continues to defend Pedro as someone who stretches teams and he has faith in David Silva.

Option...Koke

SCHEDULE

MAY 29
v **Bosnia-Herzegovina** (F, St Gall, Switzerland)
JUN 1
v **South Korea** (F, Salzburg, Austria)
JUN 7
v **Georgia** (F, Getafe, Spain)
JUN 13
v **Czech Republic** (EC, Toulouse, France)
JUN 17
v **Turkey** (EC, Nice, France)
JUN 21
v **Croatia** (EC, Bordeaux, France)

THE COACH

VICENTE DEL BOSQUE
Age 65 (23.12.50)
Took over from Luis Aragones after Spain's 2008 Euro triumph and led the team to victory at the 2010 World Cup and 2012 Euros, but this will be the last tournament for a man who seems to have become more associated with failure in Brazil than success in South Africa and Ukraine. Perhaps when he departs, his success will be recognised and celebrated, although that will of course depend on France. Despite criticism from certain quarters, he remains well liked and widely respected.

DEL BOSQUE IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"I believe that a coach should make an effort to know how to win and how to lose, to behave. I wouldn't like to see myself making a fool of myself on the touchline. But there are coaches that do it."

"When you hear people say 'this coach is a winner' because he shouts a lot, when that's how he's defined, it's ridiculous. A lie. I don't know any coach, anyone in the world, who likes to lose."

"We have qualified and the FIFA ranking shows we are among the top teams. We never dropped, at any time, out of the first five spots. There are signs of a change, we must have some patience and I believe we will arrive at the Euros in good condition."

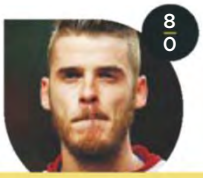
THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

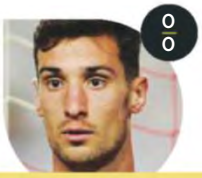
GOALKEEPERS

166 / 0

Iker CASILLAS
Porto (Por)
Age 35 (20.05.81)
World Cup-winning captain with more international caps than anyone else in Europe.


8 / 0

David DE GEA
Manchester United (Eng)
Age 25 (07.11.90)
Set to be Spain's first choice. A move to Real Madrid collapsed on deadline day last year but may happen this summer.

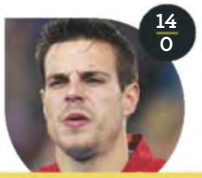

0 / 0

Sergio RICO
Sevilla
Age 22 (01.09.93)
Has made more saves this year than any other goalkeeper in the Spanish top flight.

DEFENDERS

42 / 6

Jordi ALBA
Barcelona
Age 27 (21.03.89)
Quick and hugely important for the national side, both defensively and in offering width and incision.


14 / 0

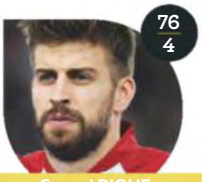
Cesar AZPILICUETA
Chelsea (Eng)
Age 26 (28.08.89)
"Dave" is not as attack-minded as Spain's other full-backs but is versatile and never lets anyone down.

9 / 0

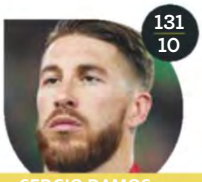
Marc BARTRA
Barcelona
Age 25 (15.01.91)
Limited chances for Barca, Del Bosque has included him regularly for Spain and concedes "he'll be fresh".

17 / 0

JUANFRAN
Atletico Madrid
Age 31 (09.01.85)
Attack-minded character turned into one of the country's best defenders by Diego Simeone at Atletico.


76 / 4

Gerard PIQUE
Barcelona
Age 29 (02.02.87)
Excellent defender and comfortable in possession. Commands as much presence off field as on it.


131 / 10

SERGIO RAMOS
Real Madrid
Age 30 (30.03.86)
Scored a "Panenka" penalty in the 2012 semi-final, but has not had the best of club seasons.

MIDFIELDERS

83 / 2

Sergio BUSQUETS
Barcelona
Age 27 (16.07.88)
In 2010 Del Bosque said "if I could come back as a player, I'd come back as Busquets".

78 / 14

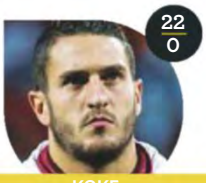
Santi CAZORLA
Arsenal (Eng)
Age 31 (13.12.84)
Missed South Africa in 2010 with injury, perhaps not always been as highly rated as he should be.

103 / 14

Cesc FABREGAS
Chelsea (Eng)
Age 29 (04.05.87)
Won the league in his first season at Chelsea but this term had to deny any part in a revolt against Jose Mourinho.

107 / 13

Andres INIESTA
Barcelona
Age 32 (11.05.84)
Admired, even by Real Madrid and Espanyol fans, he makes Spain tick. Scored the winning goal in the 2010 World Cup.


22 / 0

KOKE
Atletico Madrid
Age 24 (08.01.92)
Seen as a potential leader but, despite his talent and temperament, he has not quite taken that step yet.

6 / 0

Mikel SAN JOSE
Athletic Bilbao
Age 27 (30.05.89)
Has grown into a defensive midfielder this season, having previously been seen as a central defender.

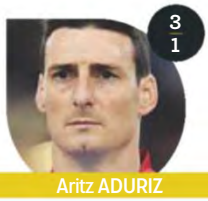
1 / 0

SERGI ROBERTO
Barcelona
Age 24 (07.02.92)
Set to leave Barca last summer but ended up playing a key role at either right-back, right midfield or defensive pivot.

6 / 0

THIAGO Alcantara
Bayern Munich (Ger)
Age 25 (11.04.91)
Seen by many as the successor to Xavi. Two terrible injuries have damaged his career but he is fit again.

FORWARDS


3 / 1

Aritz ADURIZ
Athletic Bilbao
Age 35 (11.02.81)
Getting better as he gets older. Good in the air, technically accomplished and scoring more than ever.

13 / 6

Paco ALCACER
Valencia
Age 22 (30.08.93)
With his sharp, late runs to the near post he is the striker who has best understood how to fit within Spain's system.

10 / 1

DIEGO COSTA
Chelsea (Eng)
Age 27 (27.10.88)
Fiery centre-forward with a short fuse who has rarely produced for Spain.

8 / 1

Alvaro MORATA
Juventus (Ita)
Age 23 (23.10.92)
Although his natural role is as a centre-forward, he has impressed when played in a slightly wider role.

56 / 16

PEDRO
Chelsea (Eng)
Age 28 (28.07.87)
Has had a difficult season but Del Bosque believes in his speed, work rate and ability to get behind teams.

96 / 23

David SILVA
Manchester City (Eng)
Age 30 (08.01.86)
Great touch, vision and creativity, although not always a central figure for his country.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

DEFENDERS: Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid), Mario (Villarreal), Nacho (Real Madrid).

MIDFIELDERS: Isco (Real Madrid), Javi Martinez (Bayern Munich, Ger), Juan Mata (Manchester United, Eng), Vitolo (Sevilla).

FORWARD: Nolito (Celta Vigo).

All about Zlatan

For the Swedes, everything revolves around the PSG striker

The game in Sweden orbits around one man, so it is no wonder that the hopes of the country start and end with his name. And it is not just that the public adores him; the team is also completely reliant on Zlatan Ibrahimovic. This will probably be his last major tournament and Swedes hope that he will inspire this side to scale new heights.

In reality, these heights are still far from the top. Ten years have passed since Sweden last reached the knockout stage of a major tournament; in the meantime, they've missed two World Cups and disappointed in a group stage in Austria (2008) and Ukraine (2012). And this is why their only goal this year will be to end that jinx and reach the last 16.

The Swedes turned their last two qualifying campaigns into a rollercoaster, luckily ending up in the safety net of the play-offs. Two years ago Portugal proved a hurdle too high, but this time they overcame Denmark, who simply could not match Ibrahimovic, who scored three goals, including two in Copenhagen, and decided the tie by himself. When it comes to the national team, he is in form of his life.

Although the PSG striker may be the undoubted main man, the statistics reveal that he may be right when he says that he "is worried about Swedish football" when he is gone.

Since Euro 2012 Sweden have played 21 competitive matches with Ibrahimovic in the side, and with 19 goals and six assists he was directly involved in 74 per cent of all the goals scored. What's more, Sweden failed to win any game in which he did not score or make an assist. In the same period, Erik Hamren's side won only once in eight matches when the 34-year-old was absent – and that was against lowly Liechtenstein.

> Denmark simply could not match Ibrahimovic who, when it comes to the national team, is in form of his life

Last summer, the Swedish under-21 team stunned the continent by winning the European championship title. The squad, which was cobbled together out of players from the domestic Allsvenskan, was supposed to have a secondary role in the tournament but, instead, they picked up the trophy ahead of Portugal, Germany, England and Italy – all teams that were packed with supposed superstars.

The Swedes were not just the team with the highest level of collective endeavour, but also the best organised. It was a team that showcased the best of what Swedish football used to represent: solid and disciplined at the back, perfectly organised, mature, calm and clinical.

Moreover, they had a team spirit that could not be broken. It was truly a triumph of hard work over star names, just as it was when the seniors came third at the 1994 World Cup in the United States. Or, if you like, a set-up completely different from what Ibrahimovic has represented for the last decade – an egotistic individual star on whom the team depends and bases their gameplan.

Many of the under-21s "golden generation" have already made their debut for the national team and will be considered for the Euros, but what coach Hamren has failed to find in his team is the right balance between "Zlatanesque" individualism and traditional collectivism.

Hamren, who will be replaced with Norrkoping's title-winning boss Janne Andersson after the tournament, is completely dependant on Ibrahimovic and it seems that he does not mind such a one-man show.

The coach is aware that his goal – to reach the knockout stages – is considered to be realistic and feasible even with this set-up. After all, everything will probably come down to one match, against Republic of Ireland in Paris on June 13.

It's all or nothing for Sweden, all or nothing for Zlatan's generation – and it is no wonder Hamren goes all-in on the best player Sweden has ever had.

Sasa Ibrulj

Endeavour...Martin Olsson and his team-mates will not be found wanting when it comes to effort

Best ever...Zlatan Ibrahimovic (no10)

THE VIEW FROM SWEDEN

"As far as Sweden are concerned, it's all about the Republic of Ireland match. A win in that match could easily push Sweden into the next round and I guess that is the goal, to get out of this group. After that anything is possible, but it is more likely that would be Sweden's maximum."

Erik Niva, Aftonbladet journalist and Viasat pundit

Maximum...Niva

"Sweden had a poor qualification but made it through at the last minute. Since the play-off against Denmark we have seen signs of improvement in the team, especially organisationally, and the expectations have increased a little. But we are, of course, heavily Ibra-dependent. He is our only top-class player at the moment."

Oskar Mansson, Offside magazine

"On one hand, the expectations for this summer are lower than they have been any time in the last 20 years. This squad is, overall, the least capable Sweden have had in tournament finals in this century. On the other hand, this squad does include arguably the best football player that Sweden has ever produced – possibly the best we'll ever produce. And now Zlatan is at his peak. So there is hope, rather than expectation, that this team can move on to the knockout phase. The opening game against Ireland will settle this team's destiny in the tournament."

Anton Zetterman, FotbollDirekt

HOW THEY LINE UP

Back-up for the main man

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

Whether using a no-frills 4-4-2 or the more flexible 4-4-1-1, the basic principles remain the same: a workmanlike attitude, physical presence, the high defensive line and two banks of four behind the ball, with the emphasis on restricting the opposition's room for manoeuvre in the middle of the park and counter-attacks. Sweden keep their shape well, are compact and essentially are reactive.

One of the keys to the system is the efficiency of the two deep-lying central midfielders, who tend to stay in very close contact, and as well as assiduously shielding the back four. They are extremely active in the pressing department and prompt too, with Kim Kallstrom's ability to hit long, raking passes an avenue they particularly like to mine. As for the wide midfielders, they normally tuck in and compress the space inside.

The other all-important building block is, of course, the mercurial Zlatan Ibrahimovic. In the 4-4-1-1, he drops deeper to fill the role of part-time playmaker, linking the midfield and the other front man, either Marcus Berg or John Guidetti. Although Ibrahimovic offers little pace on the break, his movement and unpredictability make him difficult to pick up. And as the centre of attention, he can prove the ideal decoy.

An alternative strategy could be a 4-2-3-1 or a 4-5-1 with Ibrahimovic left to plough a lone furrow up front.

Partner...Marcus Berg

SCHEDULE

MAY 30
v **Slovenia** (F, Malmo, Sweden)
JUN 5
v **Wales** (F, Solna, Sweden)
JUN 13
v **Republic of Ireland** (EC, Saint-Denis, France)
JUN 17
v **Italy** (EC, Toulouse, France)
JUN 22
v **Belgium** (EC, Nice, France)

THE COACH

ERIK HAMREN
Age 58 (27.06.57)
When appointed in November 2009, the cigar-chomping coach made for quite a contrast with his predecessor, Lars Lagerback: sharp suits rather than tracksuit and a more relaxed, less tight-lipped attitude to the press. A national champion in Denmark (Aalborg, 2008) and Norway (Rosenborg, 2009 and 2010), he was previously Sweden boss on a part-time basis, combining it with his Rosenborg responsibilities. Will step down at the end of Euro 2016.

HAMREN IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"Set-ups and tactics are as important to me as any pure footballing aspect – for example, technique."

"We want to play an attacking game, but it depends on the opposition. If they are stronger than us, we must defend, but if we're the favourites, their job is to keep us out. One thing is certain: we will go out to win."

"I want my players to sit down at breakfast and generate positive energy. We need good feelings."

"When you're working in this game or in another field, you're always moving forward. You don't want to stay within the same parameters."

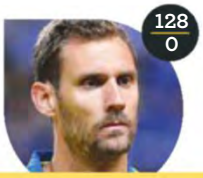
THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS

0 / 0

Johannes HOPF
Genclerbirligi (Tur)
Age 28 (16.06.87)
Prior to moving to Turkey last summer, had spent virtually all his career in the Swedish second division.

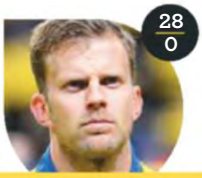

128 / 0

Andreas ISAKSSON
Kasimpasa (Tur)
Age 34 (03.10.81)
About to start his sixth major international tournament. Rarely outstanding but seldom off-key.

3 / 0

Robin OLSEN
PAOK (Gre)
Age 26 (08.01.90)
Of Danish descent, currently on loan at Copenhagen. Swedish league's keeper of the year in 2014.

DEFENDERS


28 / 0

Mikael ANTONSSON
Copenhagen (Den)
Age 35 (31.05.81)
Reliable central defender boasting experience, leadership and awareness of impending danger.

3 / 0

Ludwig AUGUSTINSSON
Copenhagen (Den)
Age 22 (21.04.94)
Left-back with plenty of tenacity, commitment and drive. Played every minute of the Euro Under-21 triumph.

50 / 2

Andreas GRANQVIST
Krasnodar (Rus)
Age 31 (16.04.85)
Aerially dominant and technically good. Had a reputation for spectacular goals with Groningen.

2 / 0

Victor LINDELOF
Benfica (Por)
Age 21 (17.07.94)
Stopper also able to play right-back or as a midfield holder. Scored the winning penalty in 2015 Euro Under-21 Final.

50 / 2

Mikael LUSTIG
Celtic (Sco)
Age 29 (13.12.86)
Celtic vice-captain, can play in central defence or right-back, but usually lines up on the flank for his country.

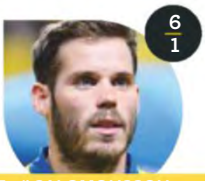
5 / 0

Alexander MILOSEVIC
Besiktas (Tur)
Age 24 (30.01.92)
Former under-21 who is strong in the air, has physical presence and is able to bring the ball out from the back.

34 / 5

Martin OLSSON
Norwich City (Eng)
Age 28 (17.05.88)
First-choice left-back. Brother-in-law of Dallas Mavericks NBA star, Dirk Nowitzki.

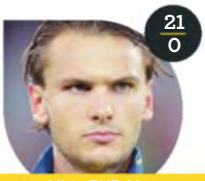
MIDFIELDERS


6 / 1

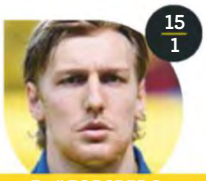
Emil SALOMONSSON
Gothenburg
Age 27 (28.04.89)
Enterprising right-back recently recalled to the fold after four years in the wilderness.

30 / 2

Jimmy DURMAZ
Olympiakos (Gre)
Age 27 (22.03.89)
Resourceful wide man renowned for his dribbling, cultured left foot and eye for goal.


21 / 0

Albin EKDAL
Hamburg (Ger)
Age 26 (28.07.89)
Offers sound tactical nous and physicality. His father, Lennart, is a leading Swedish journalist and TV presenter.


15 / 1

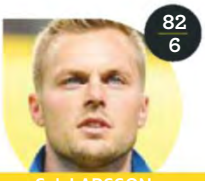
Emil FORSBERG
RB Leipzig (Ger)
Age 24 (23.10.91)
Wide man or number 10 who, like his grandfather and father, used to play for Swedish club Sundsvall.

9 / 1

Oscar HILJEMARK
Palermo (Ita)
Age 23 (28.06.92)
An uncompromising battler with fine technique. Captained Sweden's under-21 side when just 18.

127 / 16

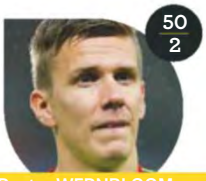
Kim KALLSTROM
Grasshoppers (Swi)
Age 33 (24.08.82)
Veteran defensive midfielder who many have claim is past his sell-by date but has never let Hamren down.


82 / 6

Seb LARSSON
Sunderland (Eng)
Age 31 (06.06.85)
Right-sided operative whose main assets are his crossing ability, dead-ball skills, good engine and work ethic.

9 / 0

Oscar LEWICKI
Malmo
Age 23 (14.07.92)
Gritty and tactically disciplined central midfielder. Another former under-21 headliner, he spent time at Bayern Munich.


50 / 2

Pontus WERNBLOOM
CSKA Moscow (Rus)
Age 29 (25.06.86)
Uncompromising sweeper in front of the back four, but can overstep the regulatory mark on occasion.

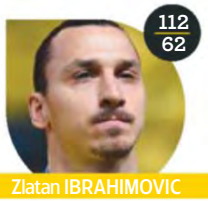
FORWARDS

37 / 10

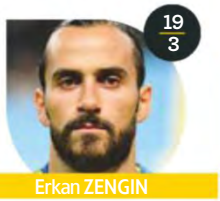
Marcus BERG
Panathinaikos (Gre)
Age 29 (17.08.86)
The top scorer at the 2009 Euro Under-21s but has not prospered as much at senior level. Good in the air.

7 / 0

John GUIDETTI
Celta Vigo (Spa)
Age 24 (15.04.92)
Battering-ram striker who for most of his career has looked far happier in a Sweden shirt than in club colours.


112 / 62

Zlatan IBRAHIMOVIC
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra)
Age 34 (03.10.81)
World-class front runner, showman and acrobatic finisher. Brash, single-minded and egocentric.


19 / 3

Erkan ZENGIN
Trabzonspor (Tur)
Age 30 (05.08.85)
Turkish-born winger bristling with flair and zip, but will have to make do with a role from the bench.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

DEFENDERS: Erik Johansson (Copenhagen, Den), Jonas Olsson (West Bromwich Albion, Eng), Anton Tinnerholm (Malmo).

FORWARDS: Emir Kujovic (Norrkoping), Ola Toivonen (Rennes, Fra).

THE VIEW FROM SWITZERLAND

"We are still waiting for a spark for the European Championship adventure. Currently, it is difficult for Switzerland to look ahead to this tournament with much hope. On the contrary, looking at the last games, there is more a feeling of anxiety and fear. The team at the moment is a weak ensemble without face and shape."

Felix Bingesser, sports editor of Blick

Weak...Bingesser

"One-and-a-half years ago, Petkovic predicted progressive soccer. But today, nobody knows how this neo-soccer should actually look. Against serious opponents, his team has never managed to impose their game for very long. And so Petkovic's great vision remains until now only an unfulfilled promise."

Flurin Claluna, Neue Zurcher Zeitung columnist

"The defence isn't satisfactory, the midfield lacks creativity and the attack is not clinical enough."

Former Switzerland international Alain Sutter

Not satisfactory...Sutter

Old and new...veteran Blerim Dzemaili (left) and teenage Breel Embolo

Slipping back

The Swiss have lost their way since the 2014 World Cup

Having come within one agonising minute of taking Argentina to a penalty shoot-out at the World Cup in Brazil, Switzerland should be heading to France in a mood of unbridled optimism. A squad that was young and still improving is now two years older and more mature, and after a poor start to the Euro qualifiers they finished a comfortable second in their group with seven wins in 10 games. Doubts, however, have begun to creep in.

One of the perennial problems facing Switzerland coaches is a lack of playing time for their top players at club level.

In the run-up to the World Cup, playmaker Xherdan Shaqiri found himself shunted onto the bench at Bayern Munich. Having found a new lease of life at Stoke City, his is a clear example of how moving to a smaller club need not be a step backwards for a player. But this time around it is captain Gokhan Inler who finds himself on the shelf at club level.

Inler has been a fixture in front of the Swiss defence for the best part of a decade, playing at Euro 2008 and in two World Cups, and it is hard to imagine Switzerland without him.

But his summer move from Napoli to Leicester City, which might have seemed a good idea at the time, has turned sour as he has been unable to force his way into the starting line-up.

Although he was a regular in qualifying, Inler's lack of playing time prompted Vladimir Petkovic to leave him out of the squad for the March friendlies and the coach dropped a heavy hint that he might not make the cut for France.

"If it stays like this, it will be difficult for him to play at the Euros," says Petkovic.

If that happens, Stephan Lichtsteiner would probably replace Inler as captain, although Petkovic may also be tempted to hand the role to Valon Behrami.

The form of Switzerland's forwards, who all play in the Bundesliga, is another headache. Haris Seferovic (Eintracht Frankfurt), Josip Drmic (Borussia Monchengladbach) and Admir Mehmedi have all been struggling this season.

Meanwhile, Petkovic has not been able to impose his playing philosophy on the team. When he took over, he said the team should dominate possession in all their games, but that has proved to be easier said than done and Switzerland still look more comfortable when the opposition take the initiative.

The qualifying campaign was not as impressive as the final standings suggest and basically boiled down to the last 10 minutes of their tie at home to Slovenia, when they hit back from 2-0 down to win 3-2. Had Slovenia won that game, they would have finished second and the Swiss would have been forced into a play-off.

Apart from that, the Swiss duly beat Estonia, Lithuania and San Marino home and away. But they also lost twice to England without putting up much of a fight and were beaten away by Slovenia.

Cracks have even appeared in the team's reputation for being a glowing example of ethnic integration in a country where foreigner-bashing is openly practised by politicians.

Last year, Lichtsteiner openly suggested there were too many "*Secondos*" in the squad, and at the same time said that Petkovic should find room in the squad for Tranquillo Barnetta and Pirmin Schwegler.

Petkovic turned a blind eye, leaving an awkward question hanging in the air: would Lichtsteiner have made the comment when Ottmar Hitzfeld was in charge?

Yet maybe it could all just click into place at the right moment.

The Swiss squad is still youthful, there is plenty of talent there and the *Secondos* have provided the flair and irreverence that was missing from the side until a few years ago.

Brian Homewood

> "If it stays like this, it will be difficult for him to play at the Euros"
> **Vladimir Petkovic on Gokhan Inler's lack of club football**

Adventure...left-back Ricardo Rodriguez loves to get forward

HOW THEY LINE UP

High press buys defence time

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

Since replacing Ottmar Hitzfeld after the last World Cup, Vladimir Petkovic has tried to turn the Swiss into a more aggressive outfit who look to dominate possession. He likes them to press deep in their opponents half, saying: "If you are pressing forward and have a high line, then losing the ball is less serious. If you lose the tackle 70m from your own goal, you still have enough time to successfully defend yourself."

Yann Sommer has replaced Diego Benaglio as Petrovic's first-choice goalkeeper, while the central pairing in front of him have chopped and changed, with Fabian Schar and Johan Djourou seemingly the most likely duo. There is no debate about the full-back positions, where Stephan Lichtsteiner and Ricardo Rodriguez both offer good attacking options down the flanks.

While Granit Xhaka, Gokhan Inler and Valon Behrami would be the usual threesome across midfield, skipper Inler's place is under threat due to a lack of playing time at club level.

Further forward, Petkovic likes to mix things a little, sometimes fielding two strikers with Xherdan Shaqiri just behind them as a "trequartista", or a single striker, generally Haris Seferovic, with two players on the flanks, usually Shaqiri and Ahmed Mehmedi.

Focal point... Haris Seferovic

SCHEDULE

MAY 28
v **Belgium** (F, Geneva, Switzerland)
JUN 3
v **Moldova** (F, Lugano, Switzerland)
JUN 11
v **Albania** (EC, Lens, France)
JUN 15
v **Romania** (EC, Paris, France)
JUN 19
v **France** (EC, Lille, France)

THE COACH

VLADIMIR PETKOVIC (Bos)
Age 52 (15.08.63)

Part of Sarajevo's league-winning squad in 1985, he later emigrated to Switzerland and split his early coaching days with part-time work in a charity shop. Led second-tier Bellinzona to the Swiss Cup Final and promotion in 2008 and then took Young Boys to two successive second-place finishes in the league. Won the Italian Cup in his first season with Lazio, but infuriated the club's volatile president Claudio Lotitio by announcing he would take charge of Switzerland when his contract expired.

PETKOVIC IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"It has never been easy for anyone to follow Ottmar Hitzfeld and it won't be easy for me to continue seamlessly in the same vein. But I am absolutely certain of the team's potential. I am absolutely convinced we can succeed together."

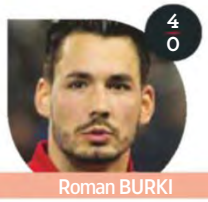
"We are no longer little Switzerland. We should be convinced that we are good enough to dominate every team in the group and to beat every team in the group."

"Today, Switzerland's football culture is far more evident than it was 30 years ago. The level and commitment have risen dramatically. Even among amateur and youth players – sometimes almost too much so."

THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS


4
0

Roman BURKI
Borussia Dortmund (Ger)
Age 25 (14.11.90)
Moved to Dortmund this season and immediately won the first-choice spot from Roman Weidenfeller.

2
0

Marvin HITZ
Augsburg
Age 28 (18.09.87)
Third-choice stopper who made his international debut against Liechtenstein in 2015.

17
0

Yann SOMMER
Borussia M'gladbach (Ger)
Age 27 (17.12.88)
First choice, he has excellent reflexes, is calm, self-assured and averse to risk-taking.

DEFENDERS

59
2

Johan DJOUROU
Hamburg (Ger)
Age 29 (18.01.87)
Played at the 2006 World Cup but has had an up-and-down career before settling at Hamburg.

14
0

Timm KLOSE
Norwich City (Eng)
Age 28 (09.05.88)
Central defender, strong in the air and calm under pressure. Born in Germany to a German father and Swiss mother.

15
2

Michael LANG
Basle
Age 25 (08.02.91)
Played for Switzerland at various youth levels and is now understudy to Lichtsteiner at right-back.

80
5

Stephan LICHTSTEINER
Juventus (Ita)
Age 32 (16.01.84)
Feisty right-back who is known for his storming runs down the flank. A winner of four successive Serie A titles.

10
0

Forest MOUBANDJE
Toulouse (Fra)
Age 25 (21.6.90)
Second-choice left-back, he was briefly dropped by Toulouse at Christmas but is now back in favour.

35
0

Ricardo RODRIGUEZ
Wolfsburg (Ger)
Age 23 (25.08.92)
Left-back who provides an endless supply of crosses, is strong in the air and dangerous at free-kicks.

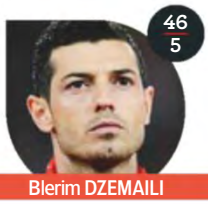
19
5

Fabian SCHAR
Hoffenheim (Ger)
Age 24 (20.12.91).
Central defender with a powerful free-kick. Worked as a bank intern until he was signed by Basle in 2012.

MIDFIELDERS

64
2

Valon BEHRAMI
Napoli (Ita)
Age 31 (19.04.85)
Happy at right-back or in midfield, he is aggressive, hard-working and strong-tackling.


46
5

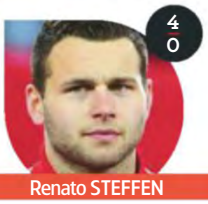
Blerim DZEMAILI
Genoa (Ita)
Age 30 (12.04.86)
Central midfielder, in and out of the team for the last decade. He was in the 2006 World Cup squad but did not play.

89
7

Gokhan INLER
Leicester City (Eng)
Age 31 (27.06.84)
A fixture in the side for a decade, he is a hard-tackling defensive midfielder with a powerful long-range shot.

12
2

Pajtim KASAMI
Olympiakos (Gre)
Age 24 (02.06.92)
Versatile midfielder with poise, skill and power, he played for the Swiss side that won the Under-17 World Cup in 2009.


4
0

Renato STEFFEN
Basle
Age 24 (03.11.91)
Wide player who trained alone at Young Boys after refusing a contract extension shortly before joining Basle in January.

6
0

Silvan WIDMER
Udinese (Ita)
Age 23 (05.03.93)
Can play at right-back or on the right side of midfield. Juventus have reportedly shown interest in signing him.

41
6

Granit XHAKA
Borussia M'gladbach (Ger)
Age 23 (27.09.92)
Elegant and composed, but looks lightweight. Known as "Little Einstein" because of an interest in science.

4
0

Luca ZUFFI
Basle
Age 26 (27.03.90)
Central midfielder with good passing ability. Joined Basle in 2014 and flourished under Paulo Sousa.

FORWARDS

25
8

Josip DRMIC
Borussia M'gladbach (Ger)
Age 23 (08.08.92)
Two-footed, clever around the box, but weak in the air. On loan at Hamburg, could miss out after a knee injury.

9
1

Breel EMBOLO
Basle
Age 19 (14.02.97)
Powerful and technically gifted Cameroon-born centre-forward who made his professional debut at 17.

40
3

Admir MEHMEDI
Bayer Leverkusen
Age 25 (16.03.91)
Macedonian-born, he had a good record with Freiburg but has found goals harder to come by at Leverkusen.

29
7

Haris SEFEROVIC
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger)
Age 24 (22.02.92)
Was the tournament's top scorer when the Swiss won the Under-17 World Championship in 2009.

51
17

Xherdan SHAQUIRI
Stoke City (Eng)
Age 24 (10.10.91)
The pick of his generation, can play on either flank or behind the striker and as a playmaker. Always a threat.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

DEFENDERS: Nico Elvedi (Borussia Monchengladbach, Ger), Philippe Senderos (Grasshoppers).

MIDFIELDERS: Gelson Fernandes (Rennes, Fra), Fabian Lustenberger (Hertha Berlin, Ger), Valentin Stocker (Hertha Berlin, Ger), Shani Tarashaj (Everton, Eng).

FORWARD: Eren Derdiyok (Kasimpasa, Tur).

Sky's the limit

Turks believe anything is possible after last-minute qualification

Turks are used to doing things at the last minute. At Euro 2008 they scored late goals against Czech Republic and Croatia to reach the semi-finals; older fans remember conceding goals at the death to Brazil and Costa Rica at the 2002 World Cup.

And that's how Fatih Terim and his young guns qualified for Euro 2016. A dramatic last-minute free-kick from Selcuk Inan secured a priceless win over Iceland and what had seemed an extremely unlikely place at the finals.

In a group with Holland, Czech Republic and Iceland, Turkey had struggled to get going and left themselves little chance of qualifying going into the final round of matches.

But a poor start had a happy ending and a victory in Istanbul over already-qualified Iceland enabled Turkey to sneak into the finals as the best third-placed team, thus avoiding the play-offs.

Terim, the master motivator, now has his third crack at a European finals, after 1996 and 2008. However, this time there are some considerable problems in his squad. Terim needs another Hakan Sukur, but top striker Burak Yilmaz is out of shape – not only physically but also mentally following a January move from Galatasaray to the Chinese league. Many people in Turkey questioned Burak's motives for moving to China and it remains to be seen what sort of condition he will be in when he arrives in France.

There are also problems in defence, where Turkey concede goals far too often. Things have been tightened up recently, but tournaments tend to expose defensive weaknesses.

Terim, who replaced Abdullah Avci in August 2013, midway through the World Cup qualifying campaign, has a fearsome reputation in Turkey as the man who guided the country to its first major tournament, Euro 96, and then took them to the last four in 2008. He has also enjoyed European club success, winning the 2000 UEFA Cup with Galatasaray, and coached at the highest level in Italy, with Fiorentina and Milan.

> Friendly wins over Sweden and Austria in March extended Turkey's unbeaten run to over a year

However, despite his status and experience, he faces a tough challenge in managing people's expectations. Turks have already enjoyed reaching a semi-final and finishing third, in 2002, so what more is there to achieve?

The simple answer is that Turkey have set their sights on the Final. Friendly wins over Sweden and Austria in March extended Turkey's unbeaten run to over a year. Optimism is high that this could be the right moment with the right coach and the right young, hungry squad. Turkish fans will travel to France from all around Europe, not just Turkey.

Of course, the players need to rise to the occasion. Star midfielder Arda Turan needs to be in top shape; Burak Yilmaz needs to recover his form and fitness; and Hakan Calhanoglu needs to maintain his incredible accuracy from free-kicks. Most importantly Fatih Terim, as in past tournaments, needs some luck. If all these parts come together, Turkey could be the surprise of Euro 2016.

Mehmet Demircan

High hopes...(left to right) Ozan Tufan, Hakan Calhanoglu, Arda Turan and Cenk Tosun

Belief...fans are optimistic about Turkey's chances

THE VIEW FROM TURKEY

"Turkey always give themselves a good chance of succeeding at a tournament. The statistics don't lie. In 2002 we had a great team that believed in themselves. This young team has a great future. We have to see how they react under pressure. The big strength of this team is we have a dangerous and creative midfield."

Hakan Sukur, Turkey's all-time top scorer

Stats...Hakan Suker

"Turkey has a strange playing character. Our midfield has a different style of player, one capable of scoring from unusual positions. But if I look at the recent friendlies, Turkey could end up bottom of their group – or win the tournament. Really, this team is crazy. We have problems at the back, question marks up front, but with Fatih Terim in charge and some young guns, Turkey could be the big surprise of Euro 2016."

Ridvan Dilmen, NTV Spor pundit

"It's is a tough group for Turkey. Look at the first game: Croatia have an interesting young team. The first game in these tournaments is very important. But the third-place team could go through, so Turkey have a good chance. Fatih Terim has always been lucky, but he is also an experienced coach who knows how to motivate players in finals tournaments. I'm confident we will survive the group phase. After that, anything is possible."

Necil Ulgen, daily sports paper Fanatik

HOW THEY LINE UP

Short of options up front

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

In previous tournaments, especially at the 2002 World Cup with Hakan Sukur and Ilhan Mansiz playing in a 3-5-2, Turkey had plenty of attacking talents to call upon. This time, with Burak Yilmaz injured since his move to China in January, Fatih Terim has few options up front and will almost certainly play 4-5-1.

Fatih Terim has traditionally loved to play attacking football, but in France he will rely on his key midfielders – the likes of Arda Turan, Selcuk Inan, Hakan Calhanoglu and Oguzhan Ozyakup – to support the front man by getting into the box as much as they can.

There remains doubts over the defence, where Serdar Aziz will start at centre-back if fit, but it's a system that has worked well over the past year, during which time Turkey have not lost a game.

If Burak Yilmaz fails to recover his fitness in time, Fatih Terim is likely to move to a 4-1-4-1, with a defensive midfielder such as the versatile Ozan Tufan, or 4-2-3-1 with Cenk Tosun up front and more attacking wingers, such as Volkan Sen and Alper Potuk, on either side.

Whatever system they play, the key to Turkey's play will be maximising the return from an energetic midfield. The form of Barcelona star Arda Turan and Hakan Calhanoglu will be crucial to any success.

Crucial...Hakan Calhanoglu

SCHEDULE

MAY 22
v England (F, Manchester, England)
JUN 12
v Croatia (EC, Paris, France)
JUN 17
v Spain (EC, Nice, France
JUN 21
v Czech Republic (EC, Lens, France)

THE COACH

FATIH TERIM
Age 62 (04.09.53)

"The Emperor", as he is known, is now in his third spell in charge of the national side, having taken over on a temporary basis during the unsuccessful 2014 World Cup qualifying campaign.

The country's most successful coach, he oversaw Turkey's first qualification for a major finals, Euro 96, during his first spell in charge of the national side.

He has also coached at Serie A clubs Fiorentina and Milan, and won the 2000 UEFA Cup with Galatasaray.

TERIM IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"Statistics are like mini-skirts. They don't reveal everything."

"Some like to talk, while I prefer to work. I can't change the opinions of others. If certain people are acting in bad faith, I can't alter their position."

"Besides weaknesses in conditioning, the players also have mental deficiencies. Their self-confidence evaporates when they go behind."

"Our group at Euro 2016 is the group of death. [As well as] one world champion, we'll fight a former European champion and an ambitious Croatia site."

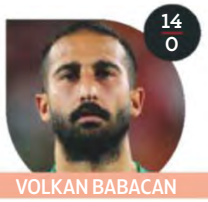
THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS

12
0

ONUR KIVRAK
Trabzonspor
Age 28 (01.01.88)
Tall, with good reflexes in one-on-ones but can make mistakes at set-pieces.


14
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VOLKAN BABACAN
Istanbul BB
Age 27 (11.08.88)
First choice in qualifying. Strong on his feet and in one-on-ones. Has not lost playing for Turkey.

62
0

VOLKAN DEMIREL
Fenerbahce
Age 34 (27.10.81)
Booed by his own fans during the warm-up against Kazakhstan and has not played since.

DEFENDERS

7
0

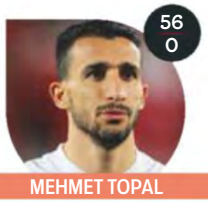
ERSAN GULUM
Hebei China Fortune (Chn)
Age 29 (17.05.87)
Australian-born centre-back, strong in the air but a recent move to China could count against him.

55
1

GOKHAN GONUL
Fenerbahce
Age 31 (04.01.85)
Intelligent right-back, not the quickest but is strong. Injury-prone for his club but still a key figure.

45
2

HAKAN BALTA
Galatasaray
Age 33 (23.03.83)
One of Turkey's most experienced defenders. Can play in the centre or at left-back.


56
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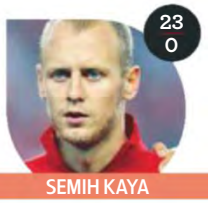
MEHMET TOPAL
Fenerbahce
Age 30 (03.03.86)
Turkey's most valuable player. Converted midfielder who was superb in the qualifiers. Nicknamed "Batman".


23
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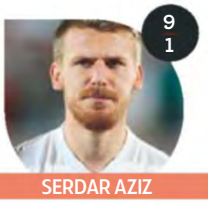
SEMIH KAYA
Galatasaray
Age 25 (24.02.91)
Centre-back, promising but error-prone. Started qualifying campaign but mistakes saw him dropped.

8
0

SENER OZBAYRAKLI
Fenerbahce
Age 26 (23.01.90)
Hard-working right-back. Not a great technician but solid and dependable. Strong in the air.


9
1

SERDAR AZIZ
Bursaspor
Age 25 (23.10.90)
Big centre-back. Quick and strong in the air. Injured during most of the qualifiers but trusted by Terim.

MIDFIELDERS

14
0

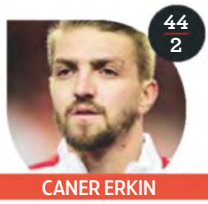
ALPER POTUK
Fenerbahce
Age 25 (08.04.91)
Speedy winger, tricky dribbler with good technique but has not had that many chances.

89
18

ARDA TURAN
Barcelona (Spa)
Age 29 (30.01.87)
Captain and playmaker. Played in Euro 2008 aged 21, but missed the semi-final against Germany through suspension.

17
5

Hakan CALHANOGLU
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger)
Age 22 (08.02.94)
Opted for Turkey over Germany. Dangerous dribbler with powerful shot. Free-kick specialist.


44
2

CANER ERKIN
Fenerbahce
Age 27 (04.10.88)
Experienced left-back or wing-back who is a strong crosser of the ball. Tends to pick up cards easily.

17
1

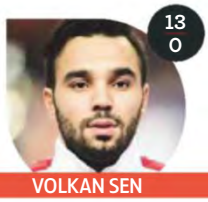
OGUZHAN OZYAKUP
Besiktas
Age 23 (23.09.92)
One of the most dangerous attacking midfielders in the Turkish League. Ex-Arsenal youth player.

21
1

OZAN TUFAN
Fenerbahce
Age 21 (23.03.95)
Powerful midfielder with good technique, strong ball retention and a great shot.

50
8

SELCUK INAN
Galatasaray
Age 31 (10.02.85)
Central midfielder and scorer of the last-minute free-kick goal that took Turkey to Euro 2016. Not as quick as he was.


13
0

VOLKAN SEN
Fenerbahce
Age 28 (07.07.87)
Left-winger who can also play up front. Unlikely to start but a potential match-winner from the bench.

FORWARDS

42
19

BURAK YILMAZ
Beijing Guoang (Chn)
Age 30 (15.07.85)
Scorer of crucial goals in qualifying and Turkey's most dangerous player. Hit by injuries since move to China.

7
3

CENK TOSUN
Besiktas
Age 25 (07.06.91)
On the bench for his club but has scored some great goals during friendlies in place of the injured Burak.

37
8

Mevlut ERDINC
Hanover (Ger)
Age 29 (25.02.87)
Experienced goalscorer who has struggled to win his place back after a spell in Germany. Now on loan at Guingamp.

22
2

OLCAY SAHAN
Besiktas
Age 29 (26.05.87)
A number 10 for his club but can also be dangerous in the penalty area. Quick but lightweight.

36
10

UMUT BULUT
Galatasaray
Age 33 (14.03.83)
Energetic veteran, good in the air, uses both feet well, but is not enjoying the best of seasons.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

GOALKEEPERS: Caglar Soyuncu (Altinordu), Omer Toprak (Bayer Leverkusen, Ger).

MIDFIELDERS: Kerim Frei (Besiktas), Yunus Malli (Mainz, Ger), Nuri Sahin (Borussia Dortmund, Ger), Olcay Adin (Galatasaray), Yasin Oztekin (Galatasaray).

Negative vibes

The 2012 co-hosts will be competitive, but that may not be enough

Joy...Ukraine fans celebrate qualification

Ukrainians aren't overly optimistic about the chances of the national team at Euro 2016. Few think Mykhailo Fomenko's side will qualify from their group.

Most believe that his team is composed of too many old players, such as left-back Vyacheslav Shevchuk and captain Ruslan Rotan, who will be 37 and 34 respectively by the time the finals get underway.

Hopes are mostly pinned on a pair of attacking wingers: Yevhen Konoplyanka, who plays in Spain for Sevilla, on the left; and inventive Dynamo Kiev wide man Andriy Yarmolenko on the right. They, however, are rare standout performers in a squad packed with average players.

"I think during Euro 2016 there won't be much beautiful football," admits Yarmolenko. "Every team will be focused on getting the necessary result. We are set up for this kind of football."

The head coach has been criticised for being too cautious, with a clear preference for defence over attack. But he maintains the support of the federation. "Fomenko is a good motivator," says federation president Andriy Pavelko. "There are no problems in the dressing room and all the players are ready to fulfil the ideas of the head coach in France. The minimum task for Fomenko [to secure a new contract] is to qualify from the group."

It remains to be see whether that is a realistic objective. Ukraine open their campaign in France against world champions Germany, while their best chance for points will be in their second game, against Northern Ireland, before they finish the group stage by taking on their 2012 co-hosts, Poland.

In the qualifying campaign, there was a clear gap between Ukraine and the group's top two teams, Spain and Slovakia, leaving Fomenko's men to negotiate a play-off against Slovenia in order to squeeze through as one of the final 24 teams.

The main problem the current Ukraine side faces is that there is little competition within the squad for first-team places.

Hard-working midfielders such as Denys Garmash and Serhiy Sydorchuk, along with Rotan, will ensure that Ukraine are industrious competitors. But there is likely to be little to admire in attack, where Dnipro's Roman Zozulya will be the team's main striking option despite only recently returning from a long injury lay-off.

Konoplyanka and Yarmolenko are the clear attacking aces. Both dictate the pace of the game, are good dribblers and very effective on the counter-attack. Konoplyanka, in particular, has great vision, while Yarmolenko is the current side's top goalscorer, with 23 to his credit.

There is hope that Andriy Shevchenko, who has replaced Oleksander Zavarov as assistant coach, may help to change things for the better and the legendary striker is adamant that the team will not become tournament whipping boys, at least not in the group stage.

"We had quite a strong side four years ago, but were unable to qualify from a tough group with England, France and Sweden for a mixture of different reasons," explains Shevchenko. "The current side is taken from quite a large group of experienced players and some exciting young talents.

"Therefore, it will be 'mission possible' to qualify from the group and thus achieve better results than in 2012."

Oleg Zadernovsky

> Hopes are pinned on attacking wingers Yevhen Konoplyanka and Andriy Yarmolenko: standout performers in a squad packed with average players

THE VIEW FROM UKRAINE

"I do not presume to criticise the national team, but I do not understand its strategy. We say that we have three key figures in the team. Rakitskiy is becoming the irreplaceable player. Without him, it is very hard to start the attack. Everyone also knows Yarmolenko and Konoplyanka – the leaders of the side. Now we have to ask the question: will it be enough in France, at least to qualify from the group?"

Victor Vatsko, Football1 TV channel expert

Questions...Vatsko

"Before Fomenko took charge of Ukraine, the national team was 55th in the world rankings, but the coach has taken them up to 27th – nearly 30 positions higher. However, whether his team is ready to provide strong resistance to Germany, we do not know. However, they will definitely fight for every metre of the field in France, that is for sure."

Yevhen Gres, Komanda weekly

"Fomenko proved that an average team can be effective and successful. There are signs of hope: Ukraine need a balance between defence and attack. But they will also be hoping that their opponents drop points."

Konstantin Dovgan, ua-football portal

Hard-working... midfielders like Denys Garmash will be crucial to Ukraine's hopes

HOW THEY LINE UP

Safety-first approach

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

Mykhailo Fomenko prefers a 4-2-3-1 formation with clear emphasis on defence.

The first-choice keeper is the experienced Andriy Pyatov, with a central defensive axis of Yaroslav Rakitskiy and Yevhen Khacheridi, 37-year-old Vyacheslav Shevchuk at left-back and Artem Fedetskiy on the right. Both wide players are used to playing an attacking role with their clubs, but Fomenko asks that they first fulfil their defensive tasks, limiting their potential to push forwards.

Yevhen Konoplyanka and Andriy Yarmolenko patrol the flanks, often playing deep in their own half with the instruction to mastermind rapid counter-attacks. Both are skilful and inventive, not only in passing the ball, but also leading the attack.

The holding midfield roles belong to Taras Stepanenko and the team captain, 34-year-old Ruslan Rotan. However, both lack pace and are often late in the tackle, risking yellow and even red cards. Dynamo Kiev attacking midfielder Denys Garmash works hard behind a lone target man. His priority is to link the play, making a special effort to connect with Konoplyanka and Yarmolenko. Garmash reads the game well and his decision-making is good.

Fomenko has limited choice in the forward department. All three candidates – Yevhen Seleznyov, Roman Zozulya and Artem Kravets – are hard-working but lack a poacher's instinct. The energetic Zozulya, from Dnipro, looks the likeliest option, with his whole-hearted commitment and ability to keep running until the final seconds.

Striking... Dnipro's Roman Zozulya is likely to get the nod up front

SCHEDULE

MAY 29
v **Romania** (F, Turin, Italy)
JUN 3
v **Albania** (F, Bergamo,Italy)
JUN 6
v **Moldova** (F, Ukraine)
JUN 12
v **Germany** (EC, Lille, France)
JUN 16
v **Northern Ireland** (EC, Lyon, France)
JUN 21
v **Poland** (EC, Marseilles, France)

THE COACH

MYKHAILO FOMENKO
Age 67 (19.09.48)
A defender in the Dynamo Kiev side that won the 1975 European Cup-winners Cup and then beat Bayern Munich over two legs in the UEFA Super Cup. In 1993, he coached Dynamo to the Ukrainian double then resigned, and for 20 years took a variety of modest jobs, including Guinea's national side and Russian club Salyut Belgorod. He was appointed coach of Ukraine following Euro 2012, and after qualifying for Euro 2016 had his contract extended until the end of the finals.

FOMENKO IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"Everything has to be well measured and calculated. We are not adventurers – bear in mind we have clashes with Germany and Poland in our group. Only the right tactics and total unity in the squad will help us to reach our targets in France."

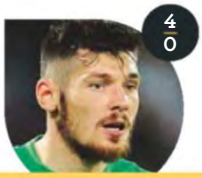
"I don't like [an] open [style of] play. If you have not conceded a goal you do not lose."

"We have a lot to do before the start of Euro 2016. I think our players have to be mentally ready to withstand the great pressure of the first big tournament of their lives. Physically, I am sure we will not face any problems, so the psychology will be the key factor."

THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS


4 / 0

Denys BOYKO
Besiktas (Tur)
Age 28 (29.01.88)
Made his name with Dnipro by reaching the Final of the Europa League in the 2014-15 season.

62 / 0

Andriy PYATOV
Shakhtar Donetsk
Age 31 (28.06.84)
Experienced keeper, playing regularly in the Champions League. The only player to start every qualification game.

0 / 0

Mykyta SHEVCHENKO
Shakhtar Donetsk
Age 23 (26.01.93)
Currently on loan at Zorya. Received his first call-up in November 2014, but still waiting for a first cap.

DEFENDERS

47 / 2

Artem FEDETSKIY
Dnipro
Age 31 (26.04.85)
Attacking right-back who will provide a stream of crosses. Key figure for Dnipro in the Europa League Final last year.

40 / 3

Yevhen KHACHERIDI
Dynamo Kiev
Age 28 (28.07.87)
Towering central defender who played at Euro 2012. Strong in the tackle and dominant in the air. His father is deaf.

49 / 2

Olexandr KUCHER
Shakhtar Donetsk
Age 33 (22.10.82)
Central defender with plenty of Champions League experience. Good reader of the game and played at Euro 2012.

1 / 0

Andriy PYLYAVSKYI
Rubin Kazan (Rus)
Age 27 (04.12.88)
Centre-back who earned his only cap so far in a 0-0 friendly draw against Lithuania in November 2014.

38 / 4

Yaroslav RAKITSKIY
Shakhtar Donetsk
Age 26 (03.08.89)
Powerful centre-back who made his name as Dmytro Chygrynskiy's replacement after he left for Barcelona.

52 / 0

Vyacheslav SHEVCHUK
Shakhtar Donetsk
Age 37 (13.05.79)
Vastly experienced left-back who is fierce in the tackle and was a member of the Ukraine squad at Euro 2012.

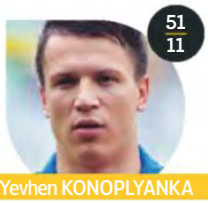
MIDFIELDERS

26 / 2

Denys GARMASH
Dynamo Kiev
Age 26 (19.04.90)
Inventive and battling midfielder, but can look vulnerable under pressure. A big fan of table tennis.

98 / 13

Oleh GUSEV
Dynamo Kiev
Age 33 (25.04.83)
Versatile midfielder who can play on the left or right flank. A likely sub for Konoplyanka or Yarmolenko.


51 / 11

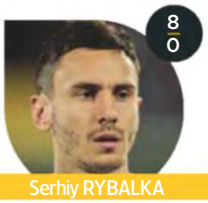
Yevhen KONOPLYANKA
Sevilla (Spa)
Age 26 (29.09.89)
Excellent left-sided attacker who has great vision, exquisite skills and a fine finishing touch. Made his name with Dnipro.

2 / 0

Viktor KOVALENKO
Shakhtar Donetsk
Age 20 (14.02.96)
Promising attacking midfielder who was top scorer at last year's Under-20 World Cup with five goals.

86 / 7

Ruslan ROTAN
Dnipro
Age 34 (29.10.81)
Captain, always in the thick of things in central midfield but does commit a lot of fouls. Squad member at Euro 2012.


8 / 0

Serhiy RYBALKA
Dynamo Kiev
Age 26 (01.04.90)
Tactically astute holding midfielder who likes to instigate attacks with his passing. His sister is a police officer.

27 / 2

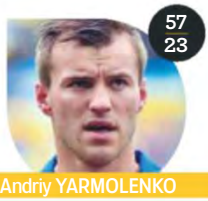
Taras STEPANENKO
Shakhtar Donetsk
Age 26 (08.08.89)
Midfield workhorse who breaks up opposition attacks. Plenty of Champions League experience with Shakhtar.

10 / 2

Serhiy SYDORCHUK
Dynamo Kiev
Age 25 (02.05.91)
Modest, physically strong midfielder, he scored on his debut, in October 2014 against Belarus.

142 / 4

Anatoliy TYMOSHCHUK
Kairat (Kaz)
Age 37 (30.03.79)
The country's most-capped player. Won the UEFA Cup with Zenit and Champions League with Bayern Munich.


57 / 23

Andriy YARMOLENKO
Dynamo Kiev
Age 26 (23.10.89)
Skilful, right-sided attacking force. Very effective dribbler, passer and finisher. The squad's top scorer.

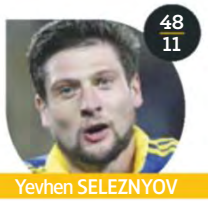
FORWARDS

6 / 0

Pylyp BUDKIVSKIY
Shakhtar Donetsk
Age 24 (10.03.92)
Currently on loan at Zorya. Tall forward who played four games during qualifying as a substitute.

13 / 4

Artem KRAVETS
Dynamo Kiev
Age 27 (03.06.89)
A graduate of the Dynamo academy, he played a big role in 2015's title success, scoring 15 goals. An impact sub.


48 / 11

Yevhen SELEZNYOV
Kuban Krasnodar (Rus)
Age 30 (20.07.85)
Powerful forward with a well measured finishing touch. Lost his status as first choice after moving to Russia.

24 / 3

Roman ZOZULYA
Dnipro
Age 26 (17.11.89)
Determined centre-forward. He made a donation supporting Ukraine's military during the conflict of 2014.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

MIDFIELDERS: Roman Bezus (Dnipro), Artem Gromov (Vorskla Poltava), Oleksandr Karavayev (Zorya), Ruslan Malinovskiy (Genk, Blg), Maksym Malyshev (Shakhtar Donetsk), Olexandr Zinchenko (Ufa, Rus).

FORWARD: Olexandr Gladkiy (Shakhtar Donetsk).

Together through tragedy

There is more to Wales than the Bale factor

The smile still hadn't left Chris Coleman's face two days after a place at Euro 2016 had been sealed. "It's not often you spell Wales with a 'Q'," the manager beamed.

But there it was, the capital Q, for "Qualification", solidly next to the name of a country whose last experience of tournament football was more than half a century earlier, at the 1958 World Cup.

Before that exile from major finals was ended, Wales had the dubious claim of boasting some of the best players never to grace international football's greatest stages. Ian Rush, Neville Southall and Ryan Giggs were all left at home rather than competing, with qualification campaigns often ending in final-hurdle heartbreak.

Not so this time, although the team suffered its fair share of tragedy. After manager John Toshack made the decision to bring through young players well before their time, results had begun to turn when the death of new boss Gary Speed rocked a nation and hit hardest the team on which he had made such an impression.

Speed's successor, Coleman, faced an unenviable task in picking them off the floor. But he took charge of a team of undoubted top-level talent in such as Ashley Williams, Joe Allen, Aaron Ramsey and, of course, Gareth Bale.

All had been given their debut under Toshack and been inspired by Speed. With Coleman adding some defensive nous, while getting the best out of the world's most expensive player, it saw them take advantage of the extra qualifying places on offer for the expanded Euros, despite entering the campaign as fourth seeds.

They did so through a series of solid rearguard displays – Wales conceded just four goals in the campaign – formed out of a team spirit and encapsulating the "Together Stronger" motto of a team who had grown together from teenagers.

But, of course, there was also the Bale factor. The Real Madrid man has shown a commitment and effort with Wales that not many with such a superstar status have mirrored. His matchwinning ability saw him score seven of the side's 11 goals in qualifying, including the one that beat Belgium and propelled a side that had languished as low as 117th in FIFA's rankings into the top 10.

Such attributes – as a team and from the individual – mean Wales travel to France with hope that their long-awaited tournament experience lasts longer than the three group games.

Much attention is already being paid to the game in Lens with England on June 16, even if a large number of fans were frustrated at drawing the old enemy, having wanted to avoid the hype of a "Battle of Britain" fixture.

Yet it is the opener with Slovakia which will have a far greater say in their chances of making it into the knockout rounds. So long as key men stay fit, and with tactics that get the best out of their outstanding talent, Wales are capable of achieving that.

Huge numbers of supporters are expected to travel to take in the games that begin in Bordeaux on June 11. The chance of a lifetime will not be passed up by so many who have waited so long, while the potentially decisive final group game in Toulouse on June 20 also brings the chance for revenge for Euro 2004 play-off heartache at the hands of Russia.

Further progress will depend on their position in the group and the kindness of the draw, but there is a feeling their ability to mix a possession game through the likes of Allen and Ramsey with a counter spearheaded by Bale could be well suited to tournament football.

The last time Wales made it to a summer finals – a team of similar talent and togetherness, led by a genuinely world-class player in John Charles – they reached the last-eight. If they can carry the belief and momentum of their impressive qualifying campaign to France, there is no reason why they cannot expect to do the same again.

Chris Wathan

Main man...Gareth Bale is key to Wales' hopes, but they are far from being a one-man team

THE VIEW FROM WALES

"Wales aren't a one-man team, I think their defence is a real strength. Ashley Williams has been so consistent over the last five years or so, he's a good leader, experienced and great to have in the dressing room. With Gareth [Bale], he's just got a bit of everything. He can score from free-kicks, tap-ins, headers, from dribbles and beating players. You can keep him quiet for

Consistent...Giggs

Historic...Chris Coleman gets the bumps from his delighted players after reaching a first major finals in more than 50 years

85 minutes then all of a sudden he can score from a corner with a header or with a free-kick, just like Cristiano Ronaldo. He just has phenomenal ability."

Ryan Giggs, former Wales captain

"I think they are certainly good enough to get through the group and good enough to get a win in that first game against Slovakia. If they win that match then it takes the pressure off what will be a ferocious derby against England and might mean they don't need anything from the last game against Russia to go through as one of the best third-placed teams. If they can get into the knockout stages then anything can happen at a tournament like this – they have shown they can keep clean sheets and in someone like Gareth Bale they have a matchwinner of the highest quality. But that first game in Bordeaux is crucial, as is keeping key players fit."

John Hartson, ex-Wales striker

Possibilities...Hartson

"They are going into the unknown, given it's their first tournament in 58 years, but if Bale is on form then I'd anticipate them getting out of the group. This Wales side have never been in this situation before, but it has almost become an expectation to get to the knockouts. Anything beyond that is a bonus simply because we have no real idea of how the side will handle the tournament experience and nerves of the event."

Rob Phillips, BBC Wales

HOW THEY LINE UP

Coleman likes to mix it up

KITS

FIRST

SECOND

Wales displayed an impressive tactical flexibility throughout their qualifying campaign, often switching formations between matches, and sometimes during them.

Having begun in a 4-2-3-1 under previous boss Gary Speed, with Gareth Bale operating either wide or as a striker, Chris Coleman sprung a surprise at the start of the campaign by using three central defenders, two sitting midfielders and dual number 10s in the shape of Aaron Ramsey and Bale – the latter with a licence to roam behind Hal Robson-Kanu, whose role is to operate a high press as much as it is to be a goal threat.

One of the centre-backs in that set-up tends to be a full-back pushed inside – Spurs' Ben Davies, for example – allowing a quick change to a flat back four if needs be, with the side also utilising 4-4-2.

It is the fluid 5-2-2-1 that seems to be Coleman's preferred choice, though, as central defenders Ashley Williams and James Chester are both comfortable starting attacks. With full-backs Neil Taylor and Chris Gunter encouraged to push on, Joe Allen as the link-man and Joe Ledley providing energy, the system allows Wales to contain and counter with width. It also lets Bale run at defenders from deep.

Questions have been asked about Wales' goal threat – they were one of the lowest scorers in qualifying – but the solid platform, plus the pace and power of Bale, means they are tough to break down and difficult to stop.

Inspiration... Ashley Williams helps form a solid backline

SCHEDULE

JUN 5
v **Sweden** (F, Solna, Sweden)
JUN 11
v **Slovakia** (EC, Bordeaux, France)
JUN 16
v **England** (EC, Lens, France)
JUN 20
v **Russia** (EC, Toulouse, France)

THE COACH

CHRIS COLEMAN
Age 46 (10.06.70)

An international centre-half whose playing career ended following injuries sustained in a car crash at the age of 30. Became the Premier League's youngest manager two years later with Fulham, before stints at Real Sociedad, Coventry City and Greek side Larissa.

Replaced former team-mate Gary Speed as national boss in 2012 and, after a slow start, began to win over the disillusioned Wales support with improving results and a tactical maturity.

COLEMAN IN HIS OWN WORDS...

"Our players have had that tag of the golden generation and they haven't earned it yet – but they are on the way. I've said all along they are good enough to do something special."

"We should enjoy this. We are now a player on the world stage. We have to stop thinking of ourselves as little old Wales and we have done that."

"For every player that comes into the team, Gareth [Bale] is an inspiration. We know what he can give to us and he is the kind of guy that will never fail you. But our biggest strength is the togetherness in the group. The players all know their jobs and what their roles and responsibilities are. The reason we are doing well is because everybody is doing a little bit for someone else in the group."

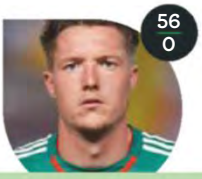
THE SQUAD

(ages as of 10.06.16 | ● caps/goals as of 22.04.16)

GOALKEEPERS

1
0

Owain FON WILLIAMS
Inverness Caledonian Thistle (Sco)
Age 29 (17.03.87)
Long-serving deputy to Hennessey. Plays guitar and paints in his spare time.


56
0

Wayne HENNESSEY
Crystal Palace (Eng)
Age 29 (24.01.87)
Firmly established as first choice. Would have earned more caps but for a year out with knee-ligament injuries.

1
0

Danny WARD
Liverpool (Eng)
Age 22 (22.06.93)
Impressed while on loan at Aberdeen in 2015-16 and has now established himself as second choice at Anfield.

DEFENDERS

10
0

James CHESTER
West Bromwich Albion (Eng)
Age 27 (23.01.89)
Broke onto the international scene while at Hull City. He qualifies for Wales through a Rhyl-born grandmother.

46
3

James COLLINS
West Ham United (Eng)
Age 32 (23.08.83)
The veteran of the squad and the only one to make his debut under Mark Hughes. Began his career with Cardiff as a striker.

19
0

Ben DAVIES
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng)
Age 23 (24.04.93)
Left-back who has impressed after being pushed inside as a third central defender during the qualifying campaign.

66
0

Chris GUNTER
Reading (Eng)
Age 26 (21.07.89)
Right-back who can cover in the centre. Plays club football at Championship level but has lots of international experience.

13
0

Adam MATTHEWS
Sunderland (Eng)
Age 24 (13.01.92)
Full-back who can cover both flanks but has missed most of this season with an ankle-ligament injury.

9
0

Jazz RICHARDS
Fulham (Eng)
Age 25 (12.04.91)
A midfielder turned full-back. Cousins Tobias Webb (boxing) and Eli Walker (rugby union) are both elite sportsmen.

27
0

Neil TAYLOR
Swansea City (Eng)
Age 27 (07.02.89)
Committed left-back with good passing ability. Has Indian heritage through his mother, who is from Kolkata.

MIDFIELDERS

58
1

Ashley WILLIAMS
Swansea City (Eng)
Age 31 (23.08.84)
Captain who made his debut while in the English third-tier with Stockport County. Comfortable on the ball.

25
0

Joe ALLEN
Liverpool (Eng)
Age 26 (14.03.90)
Was Wales' most expensive player before Bale. Sits deep, both as a defensive screen and a key man in possession.

23
2

David COTTERILL
Birmingham City (Eng)
Age 28 (04.12.87)
Much-travelled wide man who has hit form at St Andrews. His full name is David Rhys George Best Cotterill.

5
1

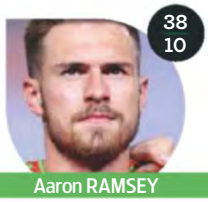
Emyr HUWS
Wigan Athletic (Eng)
Age 22 (30.09.93)
A cultured midfielder who captained Wales through the youth ranks and is currently on loan at Huddersfield Town.

32
2

Andy KING
Leicester City (Eng)
Age 27 (29.10.88)
A former Chelsea trainee with a natural attacking game who can be deployed wide or in midfield.

61
4

Joe LEDLEY
Crystal Palace (Eng)
Age 29 (23.01.87)
Won three Scottish titles with Celtic. His goal against Holland in a November friendly was his first in five years.


38
10

Aaron RAMSEY
Arsenal (Eng)
Age 25 (26.12.90)
Cardiff's youngest-ever player (16) and Wales' youngest captain (20). Won successive FA Cups with Arsenal.

7
0

George WILLIAMS
Fulham (Eng)
Age 20 (07.09.95)
A natural attacker who was used wide in the qualifying campaign before suffering knee-ligament damage.

11
0

Jonny WILLIAMS
Crystal Palace (Eng)
Age 22 (09.10.93)
Nicknamed "Joniesta" by Palace fans for his style of play and close control. Currently on loan at MK Dons.

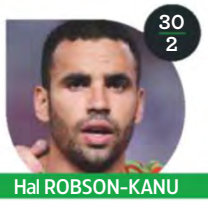
FORWARDS

54
19

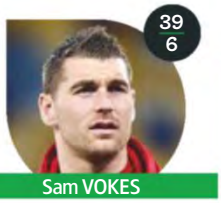
Gareth BALE
Real Madrid (Spa)
Age 26 (16.07.89)
The world's most expensive player at £85m, he has deadly pace, power and left-foot accuracy to match.

35
3

Simon CHURCH
MK Dons (Eng)
Age 27 (10.12.88)
On loan at Aberdeen. Scored three times against England keeper Joe Hart in an under-21 play-off in 2008.


30
2

Hal ROBSON-KANU
Reading (Eng)
Age 27 (21.05.89)
England under-19 who switched to represent the land of his grandmother. A winger at club level.


39
6

Sam VOKES
Burnley (Eng)
Age 26 (21.10.89)
The target-man who has now recovered from knee injury. Scored 36 seconds into his debut for Wales under-21s.

ALSO IN CONTENTION

DEFENDERS: Adam Henley (Blackburn Rovers, Eng), Paul Dummett (Newcastle United, Eng).

MIDFIELDERS: Andrew Crofts (Brighton & Hove Albion, Eng), David Edwards (Wolverhampton Wanderers, Eng), Shaun MacDonald (Bournemouth, Eng), David Vaughan (Nottingham Forest, Eng).

FORWARDS: Tom Bradshaw (Walsall, Eng), Tom Lawrence (Leicester City, Eng).

Reviews

We run the rule over some of the more impressive football books

THE MAN BEHIND THE GOAL

What a delight to have these wonderful stories back in print. To say that Brian Glanville is the Dean of English football fiction is true enough, but much more needs to be added because it was Glanville who created the genre. His novels *The Dying of the Light* and *The Rise of Gerry Logan* stand out not only as superb evocations of the world of professional football, but also as remarkable works of art.

Glanville's artistry shines through these short stories. The prose is steely, colourful, demotic... exactly what is needed to convey the down-to-earth atmosphere of football and footballers.

But there is poetry here too. In the very first paragraph of the title story, we are at "a little football field", almost deserted, cold, damp... an atmosphere that Glanville fixes at once with just nine perfect words: "raindrops hung from the white crossbars of the goals."

The old-timers are all here, the directors – usually local businessmen – and the coaches and players fretting under an archaic system. Glanville portrays them all so well, mostly through dialogue, which his sharp-eared skill reproduces with such fluency. If this makes the stories sound dated, don't be deceived. One of Glanville's coaches laments: "Work rate? What's all this bloody work rate? Footballers aren't navvies." Told that the game is changing, he comments: "Maybe, but it hasn't changed for the better." Does any of that sound dated?

Glanville picked on what he could see as the crudity of the English game. One of his players complains: "There wasn't no fun in the football, clump and bang and marking all the time...". The phrase "we play too much football" crops up, in the mouth of a strange character who haunts the press box, a hanger-on really.

There are several of these characters in these stories. Guys not averse to shading the truth, but nothing too serious. These are not guys who are embezzling millions, but guys who scalp tickets, guys who just want to be part of the football scene. They ought to come over as pathetic, but Glanville is never censorious, he treats them kindly, makes them interesting.

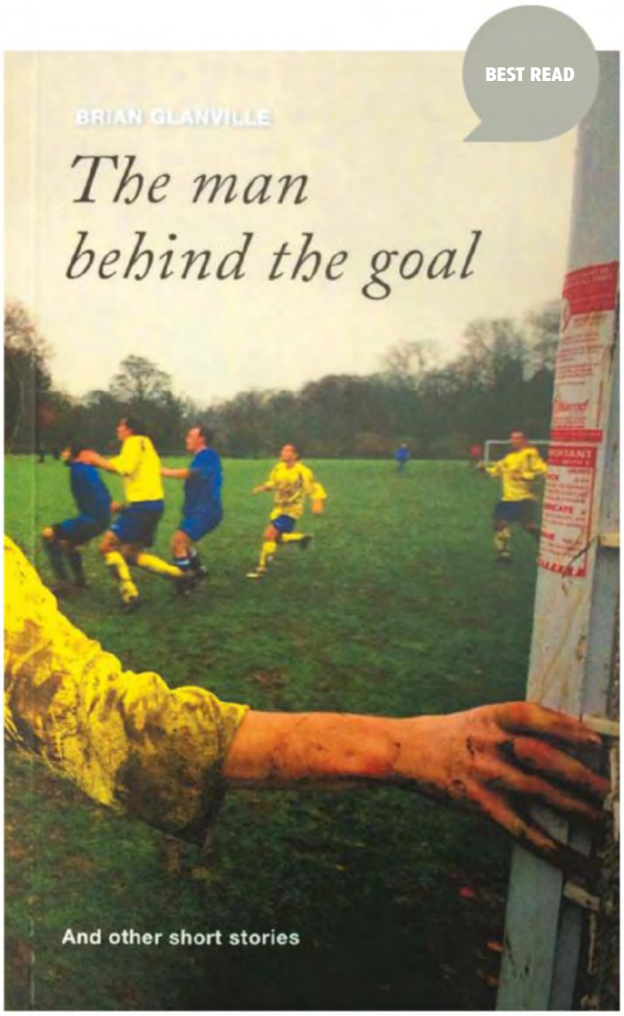
There are not many clear winners in Glanville's tales. In that, they are close to our real world. We hear the voices of ordinary people telling the truth as they know it. It is not a celebrity world, the synthetic smiles and the guarded words of the television interview have yet to take hold.

Back to the poetic, and that haunting description "raindrops hung from the white crossbars of the goals". Where Blake saw a world in a grain of sand, Glanville evokes a football world in a drop of rain.

That restrained magic, blending the beauty of words and the truth they relate, is vital to these stories. There is nothing else like them in football. If you love the sport, they are for you.

Paul Gardner

The Man Behind the Goal and other short stories
by Brian Glanville (WSC Books, £9.99)



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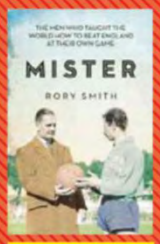
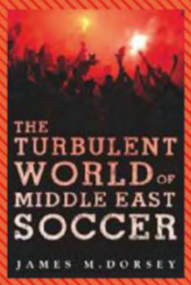


MISTER: THE MEN WHO GAVE THE WORLD THE GAME
by Rory Smith (Simon & Schuster, £18,99)
English managers played prominent roles in taking football to all corners of the world. Their tales are told with style and diligence by *Times* writer Smith. Includes a foreward from Roy Hodgson – a reminder of the well-worn path followed by the England manager and many of his fellow countrymen.



THE TURBULENT WORLD OF MIDDLE EAST SOCCER
by James M Dorsey (Hurst, £15.99)
Dorsey is an American academic who writes an excellent and influential blog on football in the Middle East, with particular reference to the crossover between the game and political influences in the region. The eponymous book is the result of his labours.

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Internationals

2018 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

SOUTH AMERICA section

● *4.5 finals places available*

Mar 24 - La Paz
Bolivia 2 (Arce pen 50, Chumacero 62)
Colombia 3 (Rodriguez 10, Bacca 41, Cardona 90+2)
HT: 0-2. **Ref:** Sampaio (Bra)
Bolivia: Quinonez - Saavedra, Eguino, Zenteno, L Morales (M Bejarano 37), Arce, Chumacero, Danny Bejarano, Cardozo (Arrascaita 88), Lizio (Duk 46), Ramallo.
Colombia: Ospina - Medina, O Murillo, J Murillo, Diaz, Cuadrado (M Moreno 85), Perez (Cardona 62), D Torres, Celis, Rodriguez, Bacca (Muriel 69).

Mar 24 - Santiago
Chile 1 (Gutierrez 11)
Argentina 2 (Di Maria 19, Mercado 25)
HT: 1-2. **Ref:** Lopes (Bra)
Chile: Bravo - Isla, G Medel, Jara, Mena, M Diaz (Rabello 21; Pinilla 69), Gutierrez, Fernandez (Silva 7), Orellana, Sanchez, Beausejour.
Argentina: Romero - Mercado, Otamendi, Funes Mori, Rojo, Biglia, Kranevitter, Banega (A Fernandez 73), Messi, Aguero (Higuain 67), Di Maria (Lavezzi 81).

Mar 24 - Quito
Ecuador 2 (E Valencia 20, Mena 90+2)
Paraguay 2 (Lezcano 39, 59)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Fedorczuk (Uru)
Ecuador: Dominguez - A Valencia, Achilier, Erazo, W Ayovi, Martinez (Ibarra 78), A Bolanos (Arroyo 46), Noboa, Montero, E Valencia, Cazares (Mena 83).
Paraguay: Villar - B Valdez (Piris 50), Da Silva, Gomez, Samudio, Gonzalez (Rojas 73), N Ortigoza, R Ortiz, E Benitez, Lezcano (Perez 84), J Benitez.

Mar 24 - Lima
Peru 2 (Guerrero 61, Ruidiaz 90+4)
Venezuela 2 (Otero pen 32, Villanueva 58)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Caceres (Par)
Peru: Gallese - Advincula, Zambrano, Ascues, Vargas, Ballon, Tapia (Lobaton 51), Cueva, Farfan (Flores 60), Pizarro (Ruidiaz 60), Guerrero.
Venezuela: Baroja - Faria, Vizcarrondo, Angel, Villanueva, Martinez (Penaranda 69), Rincon, Otero (Cermeno 80), Figuera, Anor (Guerra 69), S Rondon.

Mar 25 - Recife
Brazil 2 (Douglas Costa 1, Renato Augusto 25)
Uruguay 2 (Cavani 31, Suarez 48)
HT: 2-1. **Ref:** Pitana (Arg)
Brazil: Alisson - Daniel Alves, Miranda, David Luiz, Filipe Luis, Renato Augusto, Fernandinho (Philippe Coutinho 66), Willian (Lucas Lima 84), Luiz Gustavo, Douglas Costa (Ricardo Oliveira 77), Neymar.
Uruguay: Muslera - Fucile, Victorino, Coates, A Pereira, Sanchez (Stuani 80), Arevalo, Vecino, C Rodriguez (A Gonzalez 46), Suarez, Cavani.

Mar 29 - Cordoba
Argentina 2 (Mercado 21, Messi pen 30)
Bolivia 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Valenzuela (Ven)
Argentina: Romero - Mercado, Demichelis, Pinola, Rojo, Biglia, Mascherano, Banega (A Fernandez 84), Messi, Higuain (Aguero 77), Di Maria (Correa 31).
Bolivia: Lampe - Diego Bejarano, Eguino, Martelli, Gutierrez, M Bejarano, Danny Bejarano (Saucedo 46), Chumacero (Arce 75), Campos (Galindo 46), Smedberg-Dalence, Duk.

Mar 29 - Barranquilla
Colombia 3 (Bacca 15, 67, Perez 48)
Ecuador 1 (Arroyo 90)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Osses (Chl)
Colombia: Ospina - Arias, C Zapata, O Murillo, Diaz, Cuadrado (M Moreno 85), Perez (Cuellar 84), D Torres, Cardona, Rodriguez, Bacca (Ramos 79).
Ecuador: Dominguez - Paredes, Achilier, Erazo, W Ayovi, A Valencia, Noboa (Gaibor 83), Quinonez, Montero (Arroyo 59), Mena (J Ayovi 75), E Valencia.

Mar 29 - Asuncion
Paraguay 2 (Lezcano 40, E Benitez 49)
Brazil 2 (Ricardo Oliveira 79, Daniel Alves 90+2)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Roldan (Col)
Paraguay: Villar - Da Silva, Gomez, Aguilar, Samudio, N Ortigoza, R Ortiz (Santana 56), Gonzalez, E Benitez, Lezcano (Iturbe 70), J Benitez (Santa Cruz 9).
Brazil: Alisson - Daniel Alves, Gil, Miranda, Filipe Luis, Renato Augusto, Fernandinho (Hulk 45+1), Willian, Luiz Gustavo (Lucas Lima 70), Douglas Costa, Ricardo Oliveira (Jonas 80).

Mar 29 - Montevideo
Uruguay 1 (Cavani 52)
Peru 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Zambrano (Ecu)
Uruguay: Muslera - M Pereira, Victorino, Coates, Sanchez (Rolan 86), A Pereira, A Gonzalez (Fucile 80), Arevalo, Vecino (C Rodriguez 46), Cavani, Suarez.
Peru: Gallese - Polo, Ramos, Rodriguez, Cespedes, Ascues (Balbin 65), Tapia (Yotun 63), Advincula, Pizarro (Ruidiaz 49), Cueva, Guerrero.

Mar 29 - Barinas
Venezuela 1 (Otero 9)
Chile 4 (Pinilla 33, 52, Vidal 72, 90+2)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Haro (Per)
Venezuela: Contreras - Rosales, Vizcarrondo, Velazquez, Villanueva, Rincon, Figuera (Seijas 28; Blanco 73), Anor (Penaranda 60), Otero, Guerra, Martinez.
Chile: Herrera - Isla, Jara, G Medel, Beausejour, Silva, Vidal, Gutierrez, Orellana (Mena 87), Sanchez, Pinilla (Castillo 79).

2018 WC QUALS – SOUTH AMERICA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Uruguay	6	4	1	1	12	4	13
Ecuador	6	4	1	1	12	7	13
Argentina	6	3	2	1	6	4	11
Chile	6	3	1	2	12	10	10
Colombia	6	3	1	2	9	8	10
Brazil	6	2	3	1	11	8	9
Paraguay	6	2	3	1	7	6	9
Peru	6	1	1	4	6	12	4
Bolivia	6	1	0	5	7	13	3
Venezuela	6	0	1	5	7	17	1

Each team will play 18 games (9x2); games to be completed by Oct 2017

● *The top 4 will qualify for the finals; the 5th-placed country will meet the Oceania play-off round winner in a play-off for a place in the finals*

ASIA section

● *4.5 finals places available*

2nd round

Group A

Mar 24 - Jeddah
Saudi Arabia 2 (Al Sahlawi 50, Al Jassam 75)
Malaysia 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Kim Dong-jin (SKo)

Mar 24 - Abu Dhabi
United Arab Emirates 2 (Al Hammadi 32, Khalil pen 60)
Palestine 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Williams (Aus)
Sent off: Darwish (Palestine) 68

Mar 29 - Hebron
Palestine 7 (Ihbeisheh 2, Cantillana 18, 66, Pinto 32, 39, Awad 77, Bahdari 90)
East Timor 0
HT: 4-0. **Ref:** Perera (Sri)

Mar 29 - Abu Dhabi
United Arab Emirates 1 (O Abdulrahman 52)
Saudi Arabia 1 (Al Jassam 24)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Shukralla (Bhr)

2018 WC QUALS – ASIA – 2ND RD: GP A – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
S Arabia (Q)	8	6	2	0	28	4	20
UAE (Q)	8	5	2	1	25	4	17
Palestine	8	3	3	2	22	6	12
Malaysia	8	1	1	6	3	30	4
East Timor	8	0	2	6	2	36	2

Group B

Mar 24 - Adelaide
Australia 7 (Luongo 3, Jedinak pen 13, Milligan pen 57, Burns 67, 87, Rogic 70, 72)
Tajikistan 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Al Marri (Qat)
Australia: Ryan - McGowan, Sainsbury, Wright, Smith, Jedinak (Milligan 46), Mooy, Luongo (Rogic 67), Burns, Giannou, Leckie (Kruse 76).

Mar 24 - Amman
Jordan 8 (Al Dardour 7, 23, 40, Abdallah Deeb pen 29, Al Rawashdeh 32, Faisal 63, Al Naber 83, Samir pen 90+2)
Bangladesh 0
HT: 5-0. **Ref:** Bin Jahari (Sin)

Mar 29 - Sydney
Australia 5 (Cahill 24, 44, Mooy 39, Rogic 53, Luongo 70)
Jordan 1 (Abdallah Deeb 90)
HT: 3-0. **Ref:** Kim Jong-hyeok (SKo)
Australia: Ryan - Sainsbury, Wright, Risdon, Smith, Milligan, Kruse (Burns 71), Mooy (Luongo 64), Rogic, Cahill, Leckie (Ikonomidis 64).

Mar 29 - Dushanbe
Tajikistan 0
Kyrgyzstan 1 (Lux 18)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Asimov (Uzb)

2018 WC QUALS – ASIA – 2ND RD: GP B – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Australia (Q)	8	7	0	1	29	4	21
Jordan	8	5	1	2	21	7	16
Kyrgyzstan	8	4	2	2	10	8	14
Tajikistan	8	1	2	5	9	20	5
Bangladesh	8	0	1	7	2	32	1

Group C

Mar 24 - Wuhan
China 4 (Jiang Ning 3, 84, 90, Yang Xu 13)
Maldives 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Al Qaysi (Irq)

Mar 24 - Doha
Qatar 2 (Al Haidos 20, Soria 86)
Hong Kong 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Mashentsev (Kyr)

Mar 29 - Xian
China 2 (Huang Bowen 57, Wu Lei 89)
Qatar 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Bin Yaacob (Mly)

Mar 29 - Male
Maldives 4 (Asadhulla Abdulla 37, Ashfaq pen 81, 90+4, Naiz 87)
Bhutan 2 (C Gyeltshen 7, Tshering Dorji pen 48)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Kim Sang-woo (SKo)

2018 WC QUALS – ASIA – 2ND RD: GP C – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Qatar (Q)	8	7	0	1	29	4	21
China (Q)	8	5	2	1	27	1	17
Hong Kong	8	4	2	2	13	5	14
Maldives	8	2	0	6	8	20	6
Bhutan	8	0	0	8	5	52	0

Group D

Mar 24 - Tehran
Iran 4 (Hajsafi pen 33, pen 66, Azmoun 61, Jahanbakhsh 78)
India 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Vo Minh Tri (Vie)
Iran: Mazaheri - Montazeri (Hosseini 83), Pouraliganji, Rezaeian, Hajsafi, O Ebrahimi (Shojaeian 68), Amiri, Ezatolahi, Taremi (Ansarifard 66), Azmoun, Jahanbakhsh.

Mar 24 - Muscat
Oman 1 (A Mubarak 53)
Guam 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Abdulhusin (Bhr)

Mar 29 - Kochin
India 1 (Jhingan 26)
Turkmenistan 2 (Amanov 48, Atayev 70)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Al Marri (Qat)

Mar 29 - Tehran
Iran 2 (Azmoun 16, 23)
Oman 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Tojo (Jap)
Iran: Beiranvand - Rezaeian, Montazeri, Hosseini, O Ebrahimi, Amiri, Ezatolahi, Dejagah, Hajsafi (Taremi 81), Jahanbakhsh (Torabi 62), Azmoun (Ansarifard 62).

2018 WC QUALS – ASIA – 2ND RD: GP D – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Iran (Q)	8	6	2	0	26	3	20
Oman	8	4	2	2	11	7	14
Turkmenistan	8	4	1	3	10	11	13
Guam	8	2	1	5	3	16	7
India	8	1	0	7	5	18	3

Group E

Mar 24 - Saitama
Japan 5 (Okazaki 43, Kiyotake 58, Mukhammad og 63, Yoshida 74, Kanazaki 78)
Afghanistan 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Sarray (Irq)
Japan: Higashiguchi - Nagatomo, Morishige, H Sakai, Yoshida, Kashiwagi (Kagawa 64), Kiyotake, Hasebe, Haraguchi, Okazaki (Havenaar 72), Kanazaki (Kobayashi 79).

Mar 24 - Seeb, Oman
Syria 6 (Khribin 7, 19, Kallasi 57, Makara og 71, Al Hussain 81, Malki 85)
Cambodia 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Beath (Aus)

Mar 29 - Tehran, Iran
Afghanistan 2 (Amani 38, Shirdel 79)
Singapore 1 (Fazrul 89)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Fu (Chn)

Mar 29 - Saitama
Japan 5 (Al Masri og 18, Kagawa 66, 90, Honda 86, Haraguchi 90+3)
Syria 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Faghani (Irn)
Japan: Nishikawa - Nagatomo, Morishige, G Sakai, Yoshida, Honda, Kagawa, Yamaguchi (Haraguchi 58), Hasebe, Okazaki (Kanazaki 78), Usami (Kiyotake 85).

2018 WC QUALS – ASIA – 2ND RD: GP E – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Japan (Q)	8	7	1	0	27	0	22
Syria (Q)	8	6	0	2	26	11	18
Singapore	8	3	1	4	9	9	10
Afghanistan	8	3	0	5	8	24	9
Cambodia	8	0	0	8	1	27	0

Group F

Mar 24 - Tehran, Iran
Iraq 2 (Kamel 65, Korawit og 90+5)
Thailand 2 (Mongkol 39, Adisak 86)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Al Jassim (Qat)

Mar 24 - Hanoi
Vietnam 4 (Le Cong Vinh 8, 90+1, Nguyen Van Toan 29, 42)
Taiwan 1 (Wu Chun-ching 7)
HT: 3-1. **Ref:** Makhadmeh (Jor)

Mar 29 - Tehran, Iran
Iraq 1 (Abdulraheem 45+1)
Vietnam 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Green (Aus)

2018 WC QUALS – ASIA – 2ND RD: GP F – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Thailand (Q)	6	4	2	0	14	6	14
Iraq (Q)	6	3	3	0	13	6	12
Vietnam	6	2	1	3	7	8	7
Taiwan	6	0	0	6	5	19	0

Indonesia excluded after FA was suspended by FIFA for government interference

Group G

Mar 24 - Ansan
South Korea 1 (Lee Jeong-hyeop 90+3)
Lebanon 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Ma (Chn)
South Korea: Kim Jin-hyeon - Kim Jin-su, Kim Kee-hee, Kwak Tae-hwi, Jang Hyun-soo, Han Kook-young, Koo Ja-cheol (Nam Tae-hee 79), Lee Jae-sung (Suk Hyun-jun 82), Lee Chung-yong, Ki Sung-yueng, Hwang Ui-jo (Lee Jeong-hyeop 70).

Mar 29 - Sidon
Lebanon 1 (El Helwe 88)
Myanmar 1 (Aung Thu 73)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Iida (Jap)
Sent off: Hein Thiha Zaw (Myanmar) 86; Oumari (Lebanon) 90+6

2018 WC QUALS – ASIA – 2ND RD: GP G – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Sth Korea (Q)	8	8	0	0	27	0	24
Lebanon	8	3	2	3	12	6	11
Kuwait	8	3	1	4	12	10	10
Myanmar	8	2	2	4	9	21	8
Laos	8	1	1	6	6	29	4

Group H

Mar 24 - Riffa
Bahrain 3 (Abdul-Latif pen 31, Al Malood 63, Al Romaihi 90+2)
Yemen 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Al Kaf (Oma)

Mar 24 - Tashkent
Uzbekistan 1 (Ismailov 59)
Philippines 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Sato (Jap)
Sent off: Porteria (Philippines) 10

Mar 29 - Manila
Philippines 3 (Bahadoran 43, Ott 84, Ramsay 90+1)
North Korea 2 (So Kyong-jin 45+2, Ri Hyok-chol 48)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Al Mirdasi (Sau)

Mar 29 - Tashkent
Uzbekistan 1 (Rashidov 50)
Bahrain 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Abdulla Hassan (UAE)

2018 WC QUALS – ASIA – 2ND RD: GP H – FINAL	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Uzbekistan (Q)	8	7	0	1	20	7	21
North Korea	8	5	1	2	14	8	16
Philippines	8	3	1	4	8	12	10
Bahrain	8	3	0	5	10	10	9
Yemen	8	1	0	7	2	17	3

● *The 8 group winners and the 4 runners-up with the best record (against the teams finishing 1st, 3rd and 4th in the respective groups) have qualified for the 3rd round*

CONCACAF section

● *3.5 finals places available*

4th round

Group A

Mar 25 - Vancouver
Canada 0
Mexico 3 (J Hernandez 32, Lozano 40, J M Corona 72)
HT: 0-2. **Ref:** Ward (SKN)
Canada: Borjan - Henry, Straith, Jakovic, De Jong, De Guzman (Piette 71), Hutchinson, Johnson, Hoilett (Akindele 83), Ricketts (Arfield 46), Larin.
Mexico: Talavera - Aguilar, H Herrera, Reyes, Layun, Marquez (Molina 46), Guardado, J M Corona, Moreno, Lozano (Fabian 60), J Hernandez (Aquino 71).

Mar 25 - San Salvador
El Salvador 2 (Punyed 45+2, N Bonilla 89)
Honduras 2 (Elis 19, Lozano 59)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Santos (PR)
El Salvador: Carrillo - Garcia, Romero, Mendoza, J Barahona, Menjivar, D Ceren, Punyed (A Flores 78), Larin (J Alas 62), Pineda (Corea 71), N Bonilla.
Honduras: Escober - Beckeles, Johnny Palacios, M Figueroa, Izaguirre, M Martinez (O Garcia 64), Claros, Espinoza, Najar, Lozano (Reyes 75), Elis (Leveron 84).

Mar 29 - San Pedro Sula
Honduras 2 (O Garcia 52, Quioto 90+4)
El Salvador 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Montero (CR)
Honduras: Escober - Beckeles, H Figueroa, M Figueroa, Izaguirre, O Garcia (Costly 66), Claros, Espinoza, Najar, Elis, Lozano (Quioto 90+2).
El Salvador: Carrillo - Garcia, Romero, Mendoza, J Barahona (A Flores 59), Menjivar, Mayen (Ortiz 46), D Ceren, Punyed, Pineda (J Alas 70), N Bonilla.

Mar 29 - Mexico City
Mexico 2 (Guardado pen 17, J M Corona 45+3)
Canada 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Martinez (Cub)
Mexico: J J Corona - Aguilar, Moreno (Y Corona 46), Araujo, Layun, Guardado, J M Corona, H Herrera (Pizarro 62), Molina, Fabian, R Jimenez (J Hernandez 66).
Canada: Borjan (Stamatopoulos 41) - Henry, James, Jakovic, De Jong, Ledgerwood, De Guzman (Piette 57), Hutchinson, Johnson, Hoilett (Akindele 80), Larin.

2018 WC QUALS – CONCACAF – 4TH RND: GP A	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mexico (Q)	4	4	0	0	10	0	12
Honduras	4	1	1	2	4	5	4
Canada	4	1	1	2	1	5	4
El Salvador	4	0	2	2	2	7	2

Group B

Mar 25 - Port-au-Prince
Haiti 0
Panama 0
Ref: Reyna (Gtm)
Haiti: Placide - Lambese (Alcenat 68), Genevois, Jerome, Goreux, Alexandre, Mustivar, Hilaire, J Louis (Guerrier 88), Maurice, Belfort.
Panama: Penedo - Baloy, Machado, Cummings, Miller (A Henriquez 81), G Gomez, Cooper, Quintero (Arroyo 71), Godoy, Nurse (B Perez 76), Pimentel.

Mar 25 - Kingston
Jamaica 1 (Watson 16)
Costa Rica 1 (Acosta 67)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Marrufo (USA)
Jamaica: Blake - Morgan, Mariappa, Lawrence, Hector, Powell, Phillips (J Taylor 77), Watson, McAnuff, Williamson (Dawkins 61), Donaldson (Mattocks 85).
Costa Rica: Navas - Acosta, Matarrita (Bolanos 56), Gonzalez, Gamboa, Waston, Borges, Azofeifa, B Ruiz, Campbell (Duarte 89), Urena (Saborio 75).

Mar 29 - San Jose
Costa Rica 3 (Borges 7, B Ruiz 37, Venegas 77)
Jamaica 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Fischer (Can)
Costa Rica: Navas - Acosta, Duarte, Waston, Gamboa, Matarrita (Diaz 85), Borges, Bolanos (Venegas 74), B Ruiz, Campbell, Urena (Saborio 81).
Jamaica: Blake - Hector, Morgan, Powell, Mariappa, Lawrence (Orgill 64), McAnuff, Watson, Williamson (J Taylor 46), Donaldson, Phillips (Mattocks 46).

Mar 29 - Panama City
Panama 1 (Baloy 81)
Haiti 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Moncada (Hnd)
Panama: Penedo - Machado, Cummings, Baloy, Miller (Davis 70), G Gomez, Pimentel, Quintero, Godoy (Cooper 38), B Perez (G Torres 64), Tejada.
Haiti: Placide - Goreux, Genevois, Jerome, Christian, Mustivar (J Louis 46), Alexandre, Lafrance, Maurice, Millien (Alcenat 56), Guerrier (Norde 78). *Sent off: Goreux 68.*

2018 WC QUALS – CONCACAF – 4TH RND: GP B	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Costa Rica	4	3	1	0	7	2	10
Panama	4	2	1	1	4	2	7
Jamaica	4	1	1	2	2	6	4
Haiti	4	0	1	3	0	3	1

Group C

Mar 25 - Guatemala City
Guatemala 2 (R Morales 7, C Ruiz 15)
United States 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Perea (Pan)
Guatemala: P Motta - Jimenez, H Lopez, Hernandez, Marquez, Tinoco, Contreras (Castrillo 71), R Morales, Cincotta (Pappa 46), C Ruiz (Arias 89), Saravia.
United States: Howard - Cameron, Gonzalez (Altidore 66), Orozco (Zardes 59), Castillo, Yedlin, Bradley, Diskerud (Nagbe 46), Bedoya, Dempsey, Wood.

Mar 25 - Kingstown
St Vincent & The Grenadines 2 (M Samuel pen 45, S Samuel 77)
Trinidad & Tobago 3 (J Jones 57, L Garcia 71, 82)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Kellys (Pan)
St Vincent: Christopher - Williams, Benjamin, Richards, J McDowall, McMaster, Trimmingham (K Francis 84), Anderson, E George (Edwards 83), Pitt (S Samuel 66), M Samuel.
Trinidad & Tobago: Phillip - Bateau, Cyrus (L Garcia 62), David, Hoyte, Marshall, Boucaud (Hackshaw 81), Hyland, J Jones, Molino, K Jones (Plaza 88).

Mar 29 - Port of Spain
Trinidad & Tobago 6 (Bateau 36, J Jones 50, K Jones 60, Molino 67, Caesar 86, 90)
St Vincent & The Grenadines 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Vasquez (DoR)
Trinidad & Tobago: Phillip - Bateau, David, Hoyte, M Williams, Boucaud, L Garcia, Hyland, J Jones (De Silva 83), Molino (Caesar 71), K Jones (Hackshaw 78).
St Vincent: Christopher - Williams, Richards, Benjamin, J McDowall (Miguel 56), McMaster, Trimmingham, E George, M Samuel (Hamlet 73), Anderson, Slater (Edwards 62).

Mar 29 - Columbus
United States 4 (Dempsey 12, Cameron 35, Zusi 46, Altidore 89)
Guatemala 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Legister (Jam)
United States: Guzan - Yedlin, Birnbaum, Cameron, Castillo, Zusi (Pulisic 81), Beckerman, Bradley, Wood (Altidore 66), Dempsey, Zardes (Finlay 71).
Guatemala: P Motta - Jimenez, Hernandez, Marquez, Tinoco (Martinez 74), Icute (C Ruiz 46), Castrillo, R Morales, Contreras, Cincotta (Pappa 46), Saravia.

2018 WC QUALS – CONCACAF – 4TH RND: GP C	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Trinidad & T	4	3	1	0	11	3	10
United States	4	2	1	1	10	3	7
Guatemala	4	2	0	2	7	6	6
St Vincent & G	4	0	0	4	3	19	0

Each team will play 6 games (3x2); games to be completed by Sep 2016
● *The top 2 in each group will qualify for the 5th round*

2017 AFRICAN NATIONS CUP QUALS

Group A

Mar 24 - Djibouti
Djibouti 0
Liberia 1 (Laffor 65)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Mehammed Osman (Eri)

Mar 25 - Monastir
Tunisia 1 (Msakni 47)
Togo 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Bondo (Bot)
Tunisia: A Mathlouthi - H Mathlouthi, Maaloul, S Ben Youssef, Abdennour, Sassi, Msakni (Badri 79), Saihi (Ben Amor 46), Moncer, Akaichi, Larbi (Azouni 89).

Mar 29 - Monrovia
Liberia 5 (Laffor pen 8, S Johnson 28, Jebor 46, 56, 90)
Djibouti 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Rodrigues (CVI)

Mar 29 - Lome
Togo 0
Tunisia 0
Ref: Gassama (Gam)
Tunisia: A Mathlouthi - S Ben Youssef, Mohsni, H Mathlouthi, Maaloul, Abdennour, Sassi, Moncer (Azouni 89), Ben Amor, Larbi (Hannachi 77), Akaichi (Msakni 85).

2017 AFRICAN NATIONS CUP QUALS – GROUP A	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Liberia	4	3	0	1	8	2	9
Tunisia	4	2	1	1	9	2	7
Togo	4	2	1	1	4	2	7
Djibouti	4	0	0	4	1	16	0

Group B

Mar 24 - Antananarivo
Madagascar 1 (Andriamahitsinoro pen 77)
Central African Republic 1 (Limane 85)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Fakudze (Swa)
Sent off: K Youga (Central African Republic) 77

Mar 26 - Kinshasa
DR Congo 2 (Bakambu pen 23, Meschak 78)
Angola 1 (Fredy pen 90+5)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Lamptey (Gha)

Mar 28 - Bangui
Central African Republic 2 (Keita 53, Limane 68)
Madagascar 1 (Andriatsima 35)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Udoh (Nga)

Mar 29 - Luanda
Angola 0
DR Congo 2 (Kimwaki 44, Bolingi 89)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Mohamed (Sud)

2017 AFRICAN NATIONS CUP QUALS – GROUP B	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
DR Congo	4	3	0	1	6	4	9
Cent Af Rep	4	2	1	1	5	6	7
Angola	4	1	1	2	5	4	4
Madagascar	4	0	2	2	3	5	2

Group C

Mar 23 - Juba
South Sudan 1 (Bruno 88)
Benin 2 (Gounongbe 11, Mounie 73)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Nkurunziza (Bdi)

Mar 25 - Bamako
Mali 1 (Wague 81)
Equatorial Guinea 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Dembele (IvC)

Mar 27 - Cotonou
Benin 4 (Sessegnon 23, 90+2, Pote 37, Dossou 71)
South Sudan 1 (Lual 83)
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Lemghaifry (Mra)

Mar 28 - Malabo
Equatorial Guinea 0
Mali 1 (M Yatabare 90)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Camille (Sey)

2017 AFRICAN NATIONS CUP QUALS – GROUP C	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Mali	4	3	1	0	5	1	10
Benin	4	2	2	0	8	4	8
South Sudan	4	1	0	3	3	8	3
Equat Guinea	4	0	1	3	1	4	1

Group D

Mar 24 - Mitsamiouli
Comoros 1 (Ben Nabouhane 56)
Botswana 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Lengani (Mwi)

Mar 26 - Ouagadougou
Burkina Faso 1 (Pitroipa pen 60)
Uganda 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Grisha (Egy)

Mar 27 - Francistown
Botswana 2 (Moyana 48, Mogorosi 87)
Comoros 1 (Y M'Changama 43)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** J Esono (EqG)

Mar 29 - Kampala
Uganda 0
Burkina Faso 0
Ref: Nampiandraza (Mad)

2017 AFRICAN NATIONS CUP QUALS – GROUP D	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Burkina Faso	4	2	1	1	3	1	7
Uganda	4	2	1	1	3	1	7
Botswana	4	2	0	2	3	4	6
Comoros	4	1	0	3	2	5	3

Group E

Mar 23 - Bissau
Guinea-Bissau 1 (Camara 18)
Kenya 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Fagla (Tog)

Mar 23 - Ndola
Zambia 1 (Kalengo 60)
Congo 1 (Massengo 75)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Otogo-Castane (Gab)

Mar 27 - Brazzaville
Congo 1 (Massengo 47)
Zambia 1 (Kalengo 72)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Diedhiou (Sen)

Mar 27 - Nairobi
Kenya 0
Guinea-Bissau 1 (Cicero 83)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Matemera (Zim)

2017 AFRICAN NATIONS CUP QUALS – GROUP E	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guinea-Bissau	4	2	1	1	4	4	7
Congo	4	1	3	0	7	5	6
Zambia	4	1	3	0	4	3	6
Kenya	4	0	1	3	2	5	1

Group F

Mar 23 - Sao Tome
Sao Tome e Principe 2 (El Trbi og 83, Leal 88)
Libya 1 (Al Badri 23)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Bangoura (Gui)

Mar 26 - Praia
Cape Verde 0
Morocco 1 (El Arabi pen 25)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Alioum (Cam)
Morocco: Munir - Da Costa, Dirar, El Kaoutari, Saiss, El Ahmadi, Obbadi, Tannane (El Kaddouri 86), Boussoufa, Boufal (Amrabat 78), El Arabi (Boutaib 68).

Mar 28 - Cairo, Egypt
Libya 4 (Zubya 51, 56, 74, El Monir 70)
Sao Tome e Principe 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Koole (Ben)

Mar 29 - Marrakech
Morocco 2 (El Arabi pen 55, 61)
Cape Verde 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Keita (Mli)
Sent off: Kay (Cape Verde) 53
Morocco: Munir - Da Costa, Dirar, Saiss, El Kaoutari, Belhanda (Ziyech 63), El Ahmadi, Tannane (Amrabat 46), Boussoufa, Boufal, El Arabi (El Kaddouri 70).

2017 AFRICAN NATIONS CUP QUALS – GROUP F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Morocco (Q)	4	4	0	0	7	0	12
Cape Verde	4	2	0	2	9	5	6
Libya	4	1	0	3	6	5	3
Sao Tome e P	4	1	0	3	3	15	3

Group G

Mar 25 - Kaduna
Nigeria 1 (Etebo 60)
Egypt 1 (M Salah 90+2)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Sikazwe (Zam)
Nigeria: Ikeme - Abdullahi, Amuzie, Oboabona, Ambrose, Mikel, Etebo, Iheanacho (Aminu 61), Musa (Moses 73), Simon (Iwobi 82), Ighalo.
Egypt: El Shenawy - Gaber, Rabia, Hegazy, Tolba, I Salah, El Nenny, El Said (Ghaly 71), Trezeguet (Sobhy 76), Koka (Mohsen 61), M Salah.

Mar 29 - Borg El Arab
Egypt 1 (Sobhy 65)
Nigeria 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Bennett (SAf)
Egypt: El Shenawy - Tolba, Hegazy, Rabia, Gaber, I Salah, Sobhy (Trezeguet 81), El Nenny, El Said (Ghaly 76), M Salah, Mohsen (Gamal 70).
Nigeria: Akpeyi - Oboabona, Ambrose, Amuzie (Echiejile 46), Abdullahi, Mikel, Ighalo, Etebo (Azubuike 64), Moses, Musa, Aminu (Iwobi 72).

2017 AFRICAN NATIONS CUP QUALS – GROUP G

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Egypt	3	2	1	0	5	1	7
Nigeria	3	0	2	1	1	2	2
Tanzania	2	0	1	1	0	3	1

Chad withdrew after 3rd game; results annulled

Group H

Mar 24 - Accra
Ghana 3 (Acheampong 5, Boye 55, J Ayew 57)
Mozambique 1 (Manjate 66)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** El Ahrach (Mor)
Ghana: Brimah - Rahman, Afful, J Mensah, Boye (Amartey 73), Wakaso (Agyemang-Badu 73), Acheampong (Schlupp 46), Atsu, Acquah, Waris, J Ayew.

Mar 26 - Belle Vue Maurel
Mauritius 1 (Rasolofonirina 58)
Rwanda 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Tsiba (Con)

Mar 27 - Maputo
Mozambique 0
Ghana 0
Ref: Batte (Uga)
Ghana: Brimah - Boye, Afful, Rahman, J Mensah, Acquah, Duncan, Assifuah (Waris 78), Agyemang-Badu, Schlupp, J Ayew.

Mar 29 - Kigali
Rwanda 5 (Nshuti 11, Sugira 30, 32, Omborenga 72, Mugiraneza 90)
Mauritius 0
HT: 3-0. **Ref:** Pavaza (Nam)

2017 AFRICAN NATIONS CUP QUALS – GROUP H

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ghana	4	3	1	0	11	2	10
Rwanda	4	2	0	2	6	2	6
Mauritius	4	2	0	2	3	12	6
Mozambique	4	0	1	3	1	5	1

Group I

Mar 25 - Abidjan
Ivory Coast 1 (Gervinho 34)
Sudan 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Abid Charef (Alg)
Ivory Coast: Gbohouo - Djakpa, Viera, Aurier, Bailly (Kanon 84), Seri, Serey Die, Gervinho, Gradel (Sio 67), Bony, Kalou (N'Guessan 79).

Mar 29 - Khartoum
Sudan 1 (El Tahir 29)
Ivory Coast 1 (Gradel 16)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Munyemana (Rwa)
Ivory Coast: Gbohouo - Djakpa, Bailly, Aurier, Viera, Seri (Angban 65), N'Guessan, Serey Die, Gradel (Sio 62), Gervinho, Bony.

2017 AFRICAN NATIONS CUP QUALS – GROUP I

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ivory Coast	3	1	2	0	2	1	5
Sudan	3	1	1	1	2	2	4
Sierra Leone	2	0	1	1	0	1	1

Group J

Mar 25 - Blida
Algeria 7 (Feghouli 24, 48, Slimani 32, 90+3, Brahimi 72, Taider 75, Ghezzal 80)
Ethiopia 1 (Getaneh 85)
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Gomes (SAf)
Algeria: M'Bolhi - Mandi, Belkaroui, Ghoulam, Zeffane, Medjani, Taider, Brahimi (Ghezzal 73), Feghouli (Boudebouz 66), Mahrez (Benzia 78), Slimani.

Mar 26 - Victoria
Seychelles 2 (Waye-Hive 2, Suzette 78)
Lesotho 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Hakizimana (Rwa)

Mar 29 - Addis Ababa
Ethiopia 3 (Getaneh 28, 48, Dawit 64)
Algeria 3 (Slimani 43, Mandi 62, Ghoulam pen 84)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Omweno (Ken)
Algeria: M'Bolhi - Zeffane, Mandi, Medjani, Ghoulam, Taider, Mesloub (Boudebouz 57), Mahrez, Feghouli (Ghezzal 75), Brahimi (Guedioura 87), Slimani.

Mar 29 - Maseru
Lesotho 2 (Jane 23, Khutlang 69)
Seychelles 1 (Suzette 15)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Mujuni (Tan)

2017 AFRICAN NATIONS CUP QUALS – GROUP J

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Algeria	4	3	1	0	17	5	10
Ethiopia	4	1	2	1	7	12	5
Seychelles	4	1	1	2	4	7	4
Lesotho	4	1	0	3	4	8	3

Group K

Mar 26 - Bujumbura
Burundi 1 (Abdul Razak 80)
Namibia 3 (Shilongo 51, Shalulile 54, Somaeb 82)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Idriss (Chd)

Mar 26 - Dakar
Senegal 2 (Diame 16, Niasse 68)
Niger 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Ragab (Lby)

Mar 29 - Windhoek
Namibia 1 (Hotto 4)
Burundi 3 (Kwizera 43, Abdul Razak 71, 79)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Koto (Les)

Mar 29 - Niamey
Niger 1 (Adebayor pen 67)
Senegal 2 (Konate pen 22, Souare 43)
HT: 0-2. **Ref:** Benouza (Alg)

2017 AFRICAN NATIONS CUP QUALS – GROUP K

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Senegal	4	4	0	0	9	2	12
Burundi	4	2	0	2	7	7	6
Niger	4	1	0	3	2	6	3
Namibia	4	1	0	3	4	7	3

Group L

Mar 25 - Conakry
Guinea 0
Malawi 0
Ref: Essrayri (Tun)

Mar 25 - Lobamba
Swaziland 1 (Badenhorst 2)
Zimbabwe 1 (Ndlovu og 44)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Martins de Carvalho (Ang)

Mar 28 - Harare
Zimbabwe 4 (Musona pen 52, Nhamoinesu 60, Rusike 78, Billiat 86)
Swaziland 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Adelaid (Com)

Mar 29 - Blantyre
Malawi 1 (C Msowoya 30)
Guinea 2 (M Yattara 45, Idrissa Sylla 60)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Nunkoo (Mrs)

2017 AFRICAN NATIONS CUP QUALS – GROUP L

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zimbabwe	4	2	2	0	8	3	8
Swaziland	4	1	2	1	5	8	5
Guinea	4	1	2	1	4	4	5
Malawi	4	0	2	2	4	6	2

Group M

Mar 25 - Nouakchott
Mauritania 2 (Ahmed 36, 90+2)
Gambia 1 (Carayol 60)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Montgomery (Lbr)

Mar 26 - Limbe
Cameroon 2 (Siani 45, N'Koulou 66)
South Africa 2 (Rantie 17, Kekana 50)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Tessema Weyesa (Eth)
Cameroon: N'Dy Assembe - Chedjou, Bedimo, N'Koulou, Nyom, Siani (Matip 78), Mbia, Mandjeck (Tchani 46), Salli (Abang 59), Zoua, Bekamenga.
South Africa: Khune - Hlatshwayo, Ngcongca (Coetzee 46), Mathoho, Matlaba, Kekana, Makola (Twala 72), Masango, Jali, Rantie, Gabuza (Serero 46).

Mar 29 - Bakau
Gambia 0
Mauritania 0
Ref: Gomes (GuB)

Mar 29 - Durban
South Africa 0
Cameroon 0
Ref: Zio (BuF)
South Africa: Khune - Hlatshwayo (Nhlapo 46), Coetzee, Mathoho, Hlanti, Jali, Masango, Kekana, Serero, Rantie (Mabena 51), Gabuza (Nxumalo 75).
Cameroon: Ondoa - Matip, Bedimo, Nyom, Chedjou, Siani, Aboubakar, Salli (Kom 90+3), Teikeu, Ndi (Aboua 83), Abang (Zoua 58).

2017 AFRICAN NATIONS CUP QUALS – GROUP M

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cameroon	4	2	2	0	4	2	8
Mauritania	4	2	1	1	5	3	7
South Africa	4	0	3	1	3	5	3
Gambia	4	0	2	2	1	3	2

● *The13 group winners and the 2 runners-up with the best record (excluding 3-team Group G & Group I) will qualify for the16-team finals. Hosts* **Gabon** *qualify automatically*

2017 CARIBBEAN CUP QUALIFIERS

1st round

Group 1

Mar 23 - St John's
Antigua & Barbuda 2 (Parker 4, George 23)
Aruba 1 (Gomez 28)
HT: 2-1. **Ref:** Da Costa (Bhm)

Mar 26 - Oranjestad
Aruba 0
St Kitts & Nevis 2 (Panayiotou 38, Sawyers 44)
HT: 0-2. **Ref:** Clarke (StL)

Mar 29 - Basseterre
St Kitts & Nevis 1 (Panayiotou 67)
Antigua & Barbuda 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Moore (Guy)

2017 CARIB CUP QUALS – 1ST RND: GP 1 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
St Kitts (Q)	2	2	0	0	3	0	6
Antigua (Q)	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Aruba	2	0	0	2	1	4	0

Group 2

Mar 22 - St George's
Grenada 5 (J Rennie pen 52, Jamal Charles 54, De Punder og 56, John-Brown 67, S Rennie 88)
Sint Maarten 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Skeete (Bar)

Mar 26 - Philipsburg
Sint Maarten 1 (Boelijn 89)
US Virgin Islands 2 (Herring 24, Wrensford 70)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Johnson (Guy)

Mar 29 - Charlotte Amalie
US Virgin Islands 1 (Wrensford 68)
Grenada 2 (S Rennie 14, Sampson 90)
HT: 0-1. **Ref:** Laventure (Hai)

2017 CARIB CUP QUALS – 1ST RND: GP 2 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Grenada (Q)	2	2	0	0	7	1	6
US Virgin Is (Q)	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Sint Maarten	2	0	0	2	1	7	0

Group 3

Mar 22 - Havana
Cuba 2 (Luis 29, Gomez 77)
Bermuda 1 (J Smith 90+1)
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Tyrell (Jam)

Mar 26 - Devonshire
Bermuda 2 (Ming 42, Lambe 76)
French Guiana 1 (Evens 36)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Taylor (Bar)

Mar 29 - Remire-Montjoly
French Guiana 3 (Ludovic Baal 24, Eric 44, Contout 64)
Cuba 0
HT: 2-0. **Ref:** Skeete (Bar)

2017 CARIB CUP QUALS – 1ST RND: GP 3 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Fr Guiana (Q)	2	1	0	1	4	2	3
Bermuda (Q)	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Cuba	2	1	0	1	2	4	3

Group 4

Mar 23 - Bridgetown
Barbados 1 (R Harewood 69)
Curacao 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Royal (Jam)

Mar 26 - Willemstad
Curacao 2 (Van Kessel 66, Zschusschen 81)
Dominican Republic 1 (Rodriguez 77)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Royal (Jam)

Mar 29 - Santo Domingo
Dominican Republic 2 (Batista 50, 57)
Barbados 0
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Willett (A&B)

2017 CARIB CUP QUALS – 1ST RND: GP 4 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Domin Rep (Q)	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Curacao (Q)	2	1	0	1	2	2	3
Barbados	2	1	0	1	1	2	3

Group 5

Mar 22 - Providence
Guyana 7 (Peters 11, 30, Nurse 14, Danns 34, G Richardson 45, Mills 47, Barrington 65)
Anguilla 0
HT: 5-0. **Ref:** Vasquez (DoR)

Mar 26 - The Valley
Anguilla 0
Puerto Rico 4 (Coca 16, 53, Jorge Rivera 42, Ortiz 62)
HT: 0-2. **Ref:** Gaymes (SVG)

Mar 29 - Bayamon
Puerto Rico 0
Guyana 1 (Austin 65)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Harris (T&T)

2017 CARIB CUP QUALS – 1ST RND: GP 5 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Guyana (Q)	2	2	0	0	8	0	6
Puerto Rico (Q)	2	1	0	1	4	1	3
Anguilla	2	0	0	2	0	11	0

Group 6

Mar 23 - Les Abymes
Guadeloupe 0
Surinam 0
Aet. **Ref:** Laventure (Hai)
Guadeloupe 3-2 on pens (shoot-out held to get a decisive result as draws not permitted)

Mar 29 - Paramaribo
Surinam 3 (Rijssel 30, 36, Kisoor 41)
Guadeloupe 2 (Beauvue 15, Nabad 32)
HT: 3-2. **Ref:** Da Costa (Bhm)

2017 CARIB CUP QUALS – 1ST RND: GP 6 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Surinam (Q)	2	1	0	1	3	2	3
Guadel'pe (Q)	2	1	0	1	2	3	3

Saint Martin withdrew

Group 7

Mar 23 - Fort-de-France
Martinique 3 (Parsemain 12, Arquin 68, Langil 84)
British Virgin Islands 0
HT: 1-0. **Ref:** Van de Sande (Cur)

Mar 26 - Road Town
British Virgin Islands 0
Dominica 7 (Dicker og 20, Walters 28, 51, C Bertrand 33, Wade 44, 55, pen 85)
HT: 0-4. **Ref:** Ascani (T&C)

Mar 29 - Roseau
Dominica 1 (C Prince pen 74)
Martinique 4 (Malcolm Joseph og 11, Herelle 23, Arquin 53, Abaul 88)
HT: 0-2. **Ref:** Owen (Cay)

2017 CARIB CUP QUALS – 1ST RND: GP 7 – FINAL	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Martinique (Q)	2	2	0	0	7	1	6
Dominica (Q)	2	1	0	1	8	4	3
Brit Virgin Is	2	0	0	2	0	10	0

● *Top 2 in each group have qualified for 2nd rnd*

FRIENDLIES

Sunday, March 13

Mar13 - Philipsburg
Sint Maarten 2 (Roben 5, 45)
Anguilla 0
HT: 2-0

Mar13 - Kingstown
St Vincent & The Grenadines 0
Martinique 4 (Abaul 29, Pastel 31, 37, Herelle 72)
HT: 0-3. **Ref:** Gaymes (SVG)

Tuesday, March 15

Mar15 - Managua
Nicaragua 1 (Galeano pen 48)
Panama 0
HT: 0-0
Nicaragua: D Tellez - Rosas (Veliz 16), E Tellez, Casco, Quijano, M Montiel, Coronel, Galeano, Chavarria, Pavon (B Montiel 89), D Reyes.
Panama: A Rodriguez - M Gomez (Munoz 89), Chen, Miller, Murillo, Macea (Aguilar 46), Vargas, Martinez (Ortiz 74), Sanchez (Quinonez 59), Moreno (Yau 71), Nunez. *Sent off: Vargas 90+2.*

Friday, March 18

Mar18 - Tehran, Iran
Iraq 0
Syria 1 (Omari 29)
HT: 0-0

Mar18 - Abu Dhabi
United Arab Emirates 6 (Al Hammadi 2, 73, Khalil 49, S Saleh 85, 87, Ali 90)
Bangladesh 1 (Jibon 5)
HT: 1-1

Saturday, March 19

Mar19 - St George's
Grenada 2 (Jamal Charles 45, J Rennie 49)
Trinidad & Tobago 2 (S Winchester 25, Joseph 90+3)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Gaymes (SVG)

Mar19 - Taipei
Taiwan 3 (Chen Chao-an 5, Wu Chun-ching 61, Chen Wei-chuan 80)
Guam 2 (Lee 34, Malcolm 44)
HT: 1-2

Tuesday, March 22

Mar 22 - Freetown
Sierra Leone 1 (A Sesay 42)
Malawi 1 (Mhone 18)
HT: 1-1

Wednesday, March 23

Mar 23 - Osijek
Croatia 2 (Perisic 4, Brozovic 34)
Israel 0
HT: 2-0. **Att:** 10,545. **Ref:** Vad (Hun)
Croatia: Subasic (L Kalinic 46) - Corluka (Schildenfeld 46), Lovren, Vida, Srna (Vrsaljko 44), Brozovic, Badelj (Halilovic 51), Modric (Antolic 68), Perisic, Mandzukic, N Kalinic (Kovacic 57).
Israel: Kleiman - Tibi, B Biton (Tzedek 46), Tawatha (Seif 67), Gershon, Kehat (Kayal 83), N Biton, Buzaglo (A Cohen 46), Tal Ben Haim/F (Benayoun 77), Dabour, Hemed (Barda 77).

Mar 23 - Gibraltar
Gibraltar 0
Liechtenstein 0
Ref: Stewart (Wal)

Mar 23 - Poznan
Poland 1 (Blaszczykowski 28)
Serbia 0
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 38,271. **Ref:** Harkam (Aut)
Poland: Fabianski (Szczesny 46) - Piszczek, Salamon (Pazdan 87), Glik, Rybus, Blaszczykowski, Zielinski (Borysiuk 83), Krychowiak (Jodlowiec 76), Grosicki (Kapustka 75), Milik, Lewandowski (Teodorczyk 73).
Serbia: Stojkovic - Ivanovic, Nikola Maksimovic (Spajic 90), S Rajkovic, Kolarov, Z Tosic (Sulejmani 66), Milivojevic (Nemanja Maksimovic 73), Matic (Brasanac 85), Ljajic, Kostic (Mladenovic 78), Stojiljkovic (Djuricic 56).

Mar 23 - Giurgiu
Romania 1 (Stanciu 65)
Lithuania 0
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 4,368.
Ref: Fernandez Borbalan (Spa)
Romania: Pantilimon - Matel, Chiriches, Moti, Filip (Tosca 86), Pintilii, Sanmartean (Hoban 59), Torje (Ivan 58), Tanase (Stanciu 46), Stancu (Hora 76), Rusescu (Keseru 46).
Lithuania: Zubas - Freidgeimas, Vaitkunas, Andriuskevicius, Girdvainis, Luksa (Mikoliunas 58), Zulpa, Petravicius (Veliulis 83), Slivka (Kuklys 68), Cernych (Panka 83), Spalvis (Matulevicius 68).

Mar 23 - Koper
Slovenia 1 (Bezjak 58)
Macedonia 0
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 3,500. **Ref:** Mazic (Ser)
Slovenia: Oblak - Cesar, Aljaz Struna (Samardzic 46), Skubic, Jokic, Krhin (Vrhovec 89), Kurtic, Zajc (Jelenic 87), Verbic (Kirm 63), Ilicic (Birsa 46), Bezjak (Novakovic 70).
Macedonia: Dimitrievski - Ristovski (Kostovski 82), Zhuta (Siljanovski 82), Ibraimi (Jahovikj 55), Trajkovski, Trickovski (Alimi 46), Stjepanovikj, Gligorov (Cikarski 73), Sikov, Pandev (Nestorovski 46), Ristevski.

Thursday, March 24

Mar 24 - Prague
Czech Republic 0
Scotland 1 (Anya 10)
HT: 0-1. **Att:** 14,580. **Ref:** McLaughlin (RoI)
Czech Republic: Koubek - Kaderabek, Sivok, M Kadlec, Limbersky, Darida (Rada 87), Vacek (Marecek 78), Dockal (Kolar 65), Frydek (Skalak 46), Sural (Pudil 78), Necid (Vydra 65).
Scotland: McGregor - Hutton, R Martin, Berra, Robertson (Bannan 58), Mulgrew, D Fletcher, McLean (Phillips 58), Snodgrass, Anya (Caddis 88), McCormack (Watt 78).

Mar 24 - Herning
Denmark 2 (N Jorgensen 51, 54)
Iceland 1 (Traustason 90)
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 9,194. **Ref:** Hansen (Nor)
Denmark: Schmeichel - Kjaer, Agger (Vestergaard 62), Durmisi, A Christensen, Dalsgaard, Eriksen (Schone 62), Delaney, Hojbjerg (Kvist 83), N Jorgensen (Vibe 62), Y Poulsen (Braithwaite 79).
Iceland: Kristinsson - Hauksson, R Sigurdsson, B Bjarnason (Traustason 71), Sigthorsson (Bodvarsson 71), G Sigurdsson (T Bjarnason 81), Finnbogason, Arnason, A Gunnarsson, Magnusson, Hallfredsson (J Gudmundsson 46).

Mar 24 - Tallinn
Estonia 0
Norway 0
Att: 2,892. **Ref:** Dallas (Sco)
Estonia: Aksalu - Teniste, Jaager, Klavan (Baranov 86), Pikk, Aleksandr Dmitrijev, Mets, Raudsepp (H Anier 64), Vassiljev (Antonov 90), Kallaste (S Puri 74), Zenjov.
Norway: Jarstein - Linnes, Hovland, Forren, Aleesami, Nordtveit (Selnaes 64), Johansen, Skjelbred (Midtsjo 86), Berget, Valon Berisha, Diomande (Soderlund 64).

Mar 24 - Piraeus
Greece 2 (Tzavellas 54, Karelis 63)
Montenegro 1 (Tomasevic 56)
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 3,500. **Ref:** Kovacs (Rom)
Greece: Karnezis - Tzavellas, Manolas (Oikonomou 66), Papastathopoulos, Torosidis (Tziolis 85), Stafylidis (Siovas 85), Mantalos (Karelis 46), Samaris, Petsos, Fortounis, Mitroglou (Tachtsidis 90+3).
Montenegro: Mijatovic - Marusic, Saveljic, Simic, Tomasevic (Zverotic 75), N Vukcevic, Scekic (Boljevic 85), Rodic (Zoric 88), Bakic (Grbic 75), Mugosa (Raicevic 69), Beciraj.

Mar 24 - Udine
Italy 1 (Insigne 68)
Spain 1 (Aduriz 70)
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 23,300. **Ref:** Aytekin (Ger)
Italy: Buffon - Darmian, Bonucci, Astori, Florenzi (De Silvestri 89), Parolo (Jorginho 89), Thiago Motta, Giaccherini (Antonelli 79), Candreva (Bernardeschi 60), Pelle (Zaza 60), Eder (Insigne 51).
Spain: De Gea - Juanfran (Jordi Alba 79), Pique, Sergio Ramos (Nacho 46), Azpilicueta, Thiago (Isco 60), San Jose, Fabregas, Mata (Koke 46), Aduriz (Silva 71), Morata (Paco Alcacer 85).

Mar 24 - Valletta
Malta 0
Moldova 0
Att: 500. **Ref:** Tarajev (Est)
Malta: Bonello - J Caruana (Grioli 87), Zerafa, Agius, Failla (Camilleri 81), P Fenech (Scicluna 87), R Muscat, Schembri (M Mifsud 84), Kristensen (Sciberras 52), Effiong, Z Muscat (S Borg 56).
Moldova: Gaiduchevici - Armas, Epureanu (Racu 46), Ionita, Gatcan, Antoniuc (Mihaliov 72), Bordian, Cascaval, Cemirtan (Ginsari 77), Cojocari, Sidorenco (Dedov 62).

Mar 24 - Singapore
Singapore 2 (Shahril 27, Fazrul 87)
Myanmar 1 (Suan Lam Mang 65)
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 5,280

Mar 24 - Honiara
Solomon Islands 2 (Totori 9, Nawo 45+2)
Papua New Guinea 0
HT: 2-0

Mar 24 - Antalya
Turkey 2 (Tosun 32, 81)
Sweden 1 (Granqvist 74)
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 33,000. **Ref:** Makkelie (Hol)
Turkey: Volkan Babacan - Hakan Balta (Ahmet 38), Gokhan Gonul, Selcuk Inan, Tosun (Malli 82), Arda (Sahan 90+2), Ozyakup (Alper 63), Mehmet Topal, Ozan (Caglar 90+4), Caner, Volkan Sen (Frei 65).
Sweden: Olsen - Lustig, Granqvist, Ekdal (Hiljemark 80), Kallstrom (Wernbloom 70), Berg, Lindelof, Augustinsson, Guidetti (Kujovic 63), Durmaz (S Larsson 46), Zengin (Forsberg 63).

Mar 24 - Odessa
Ukraine 1 (Stepanenko 40)
Cyprus 0
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 21,300. **Ref:** Grinfeld (Isr)
Ukraine: Boyko - Fedetskyi, Kucher, Putivtsev, Shevchuk (Kamenyuka 81), Stepanenko (Tymoshchuk 72), Husiev (Petriak 46), Yarmolenko, Harmash (Malyshev 46), Rotan (Kovalenko 46), Zozulya (Kravets 64).
Cyprus: Panayi - Dossa Junior, Efrem (Makris 58), Laifis, Artymatas (Nikolaou 89), Demetriou, Makrides, Laban (Kyriakou 81), Charalambides (Englezou 77), Alexandrou, Mytidis (Sotiriou 70).

Mar 24 - Cardiff
Wales 1 (Church pen 89)
Northern Ireland 1 (Cathcart 60)
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 21,855. **Ref:** McLean (Sco)
Wales: Hennessey (Ward 46) - Gunter, Chester, A Williams, Matthews, Ledley (Crofts 46), Vaughan (Allen 71), G Williams (Isgrove 62), Lawrence (J Williams 62), Cotterill, Vokes (Church 76).
Northern Ireland: McGovern - C McLaughlin (A Hughes 81), Cathcart, McAuley, J Evans (D Lafferty 74), Norwood, McNair (Paton 74), Davis, Washington (Ward 46), Dallas (Ferguson 90), K Lafferty (McKay 81).

Friday, March 25

Mar 25 - Yerevan
Armenia 0
Belarus 0
Ref: Vadatchkoria (Geo)
Armenia: Berezovsky (Beglaryan 8) - Mkoyan (Hambardzumyan 68), Hayrapetyan, Haroyan, Andonian, Manoyan, Malakyan, Mkhitaryan, Pizzelli (Kadimyan 68), Ozbiliz (Sarkisov 62), Manucharyan (Barseghyan 81).
Belarus: Chernik - Shitov, Filipenko, Polyakov, Sivakov, Balanovich, Kalachev (Volodko 62), Dragun, Krivets (Kislyak 62), Bressan (Yanush 80), Kornilenko.

Mar 25 - Franceville
Gabon 2 (Aubameyang pen 36, Evouna 57)
Sierra Leone 1 (S Fofanah 80)
HT: 1-0
Sent off: Deen-Conteh (Sierra Leone) 35

Mar 25 - Amsterdam
Holland 2 (L De Jong 47, Afellay 86)
France 3 (Griezmann 6, Giroud 13, Matuidi 88)
HT: 0-2. **Att:** 46,103. **Ref:** Zwayer (Ger)
Holland: Cillessen - Bruma, Van Dijk (Afellay 46), Blind, Veltman, Clasie (Depay 46), Sneijder (Bazoer 37), Willems (Van Aanholt 78), Klaassen (Wijnaldum 76), L De Jong (Janssen 81), Promes.
France: Mandanda - Jallet, Varane, Koscielny, Evra (Digne 46), Pogba (Sissoko 87), L Diarra (Kante 46), Matuidi, Griezmann (Martial 46), Giroud (Gignac 73), Payet.

Mar 25 - Luxembourg
Luxembourg 0
Bosnia-Herzegovina 3 (Chanot og 73, Djuric 75, Pjanic 90+1)
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 3,731. **Ref:** Lardot (Blg)
Luxembourg: Moris - Delgado (Shnell 53), Malget, Chanot, Jans, Mutsch (V Thill 70), Philipps (Payal 84), Gerson, C Martins (Deville 59), Bensi (Da Mota 59), Joachim (Turpel 84).
Bosnia-Herzegovina: Begovic (Sehic 46) - O Vranjes (Susic 46), Sunjic, Anicic, Zukanovic, Prcic (Grahovac 77), Besic (Pjanic 67), Visca (Duljevic 59), Ibisevic (Dzeko 46), Djuric, Vrancic.

Mar 25 - Leiria
Portugal 0
Bulgaria 1 (Marcelinho 19)
HT: 0-1. **Att:** 19,355. **Ref:** Clos Gomez (Spa)
Portugal: Anthony Lopes - Vieirinha, Bruno Alves, Pepe, Eliseu (Raphael Guerreiro 82), William Carvalho (Danilo Pereira 75), Joao Mario (Renato Sanches 75), Adrien Silva (Danny 65), Nani (Eder 82), Cristiano Ronaldo, Rafa Silva (Quaresma 66).
Bulgaria: V Stoyanov - S Popov (Bozhikov 88), A Aleksandrov, Bodurov, M Aleksandrov (Slavchev 66; Terziev 90), Rangelov, I Popov (Delev 90), Marcelinho (Tonev 83), Chochev, Z Milanov, Dyakov.

Mar 25 - Dublin
Republic of Ireland 1 (Clark 2)
Switzerland 0
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 35,450. **Ref:** Zelinka (CzR)
Rep Ireland: Randolph - Coleman, Duffy, Clark, Brady, Judge, Meyler (O'Kane 62), Quinn (McCarthy 62), McGeady (Hayes 62), Long (McClean 84), Doyle (D Murphy 26; Hoolahan 78).
Switzerland: Sommer - Lang (Widmer 81), Schar, Klose, Rodriguez (Moubandje 78), Xhaka, Dzemaili (Tarashaj 71), Behrami (Fernandes 71), Mehmedi (Kasami 71), Embolo, Seferovic (Steffen 62).

Mar 25 - Trnava
Slovakia 0
Latvia 0
Att: 12,405. **Ref:** Lechner (Aut)
Slovakia: Mucha - Pekarik, Skrtel (Svento 82), Durica, Hubocan, Hrosovsky, Duda, Weiss, Hamsik (Sabo 89), Mak, Duris.
Latvia: Vanins - Gorkss, Dubra, Gabovs, Maksimenko, Tarasovs (Jagodinskis 90), Ikaunieks (A Visnakovs 57), Lazdins, Zjuzins (Sabala 66), Savalnieks (Laizans 76), Rudnevs (Karasausks 81).

Saturday, March 26

Mar 26 - Vienna
Austria 2 (Janko 6, Harnik 13)
Albania 1 (Lenjani 47)
HT: 2-0. **Att:** 28,600. **Ref:** Kruzliak (Slk)
Austria: Almer - Klein, Hinteregger (Wimmer 46), Dragovic, Fuchs (Suttner 46), Baumgartlinger (Ilsanker 76), Alaba (Schopf 87), Harnik, Junuzovic, Arnautovic (Burgstaller 87), Janko (Okotie 79).
Albania: Berisha - Hysaj, Cana, Mavraj, Lila (Roshi 46), Agolli, Lenjani (Sadiku 79), Kace, Xhaka (Kukeli 86), Abrashi (Basha 86), Balaj (Cikalleshi 46). *Sent off: Kace 78.*

Mar 26 - Antalya, Turkey
Azerbaijan 0
Kazakhstan 1 (Baizhanov 81)
HT: 0-0
Azerbaijan: K Agayev - Medvedev (Mirzabekov 46), B Huseynov, R F Sadygov (Guliyev 46), Dashdemirov, Karayev, Abdullayev, Nazarov, Ismayilov (E Mammadov 61), Ramazanov (Taghiyev 46), R Kurbanov.
Kazakhstan: Pokatilov - Akhmetov, Logvinenko, Khizhnichenko (Schetkin 70), Baizhanov (Kuat 59), Maliy, Shomko, Islamkhan (Nurgaliyev 64), Muzhikov (Suyumbayev 75), Smakov (Tagybergen 88), Konysbayev (Dosmagambetov 67).

Mar 26 - Berlin
Germany 2 (Kroos 43, Gomez 57)
England 3 (Kane 61, Vardy 75, Dier 90+1)
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 71,413. **Ref:** Rocchi (Ita)
Germany: Neuer - Can, Rudiger, Hummels (Tah 46), Hector, Khedira, Kroos, T Muller (Podolski 75), Ozil, Reus (Schurrle 64), Gomez (Gotze 80).
England: Butland (Forster 45+1) - Clyne, Cahill, Smalling, Rose, Dier, Henderson, Lallana (Barkley 71), Alli, Welbeck (Vardy 71), Kane.

Mar 26 - Budapest
Hungary 1 (Dzsudzsak 79)
Croatia 1 (Mandzukic 29)
HT: 0-1. **Att:** 20,300. **Ref:** Prihoda (CzR)
Hungary: Dibusz (Bogdan 46) - Fiola, Guzmics, Lang, Korhut, Nagy (Elek 46), Gera, Nemeth (Szalai 46), Kleinheisler (Bode 80), Dzsudzsak (Stieber 82), Priskin (Nikolic 46).
Croatia: L Kalinic - Corluka, Vida, Schildenfeld, Vrsaljko, Modric, Antolic, Kovacic (Srna 76), Brozovic, Mandzukic, Perisic.

Mar 26 - Wroclaw
Poland 5 (Grosicki 18, 85, Wszolek 20, 66, Starzynski 32)
Finland 0
HT: 3-0. **Att:** 42,068. **Ref:** Kimura (Jap)
Poland: Boruc (Tyton 46) - Jedrzejczyk, Glik, Pazdan, Wawrzyniak, Krychowiak (Jodlowiec 46), Kapustka (Salamon 79), Wszolek (Blaszczykowski 86), Starzynski (Zielinski 67), Grosicki, Milik (Lewandowski 63).
Finland: Hradecky - Arkivuo, Toivio, Arajuuri, Uronen, Ring (Saksela 83), Sparv, R Eremenko (Lam 78), P Hetemaj (Lod 46), Hamalainen (Schuller 46), Pohjanpalo (Pukki 62).

Mar 26 - Moscow
Russia 3 (Smolov 41, Golovin 61, Glushakov 72)
Lithuania 0
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 35,400. **Ref:** Orsato (Ita)
Russia: Kritsyuk (Guilherme 46) - Smolnikov, A Berezutsky (Kerzhakov 46), Ignashevich, D Kombarov, Samedov (Ionov 46), Tarasov, Glushakov, Mamaev (Yusupov 46), Ivanov (Maksimov 69), Smolov (Golovin 46).
Lithuania: Cerniauskas - Mikuckis, Klimavicius, Andriuskevicius (Vaitkunas 46), D Cesnauskis (Beneta 60), Mikoliunas (Petravicius 46), Zulpa, Slivka (Kuklys 86), Verbickas, Cernych (Luksa 80), Spalvis (Matulevicius 60).

Mar 26 - Port Vila
Vanuatu 2 (Masauvakalo 83, B Kaltack pen 87)
New Caledonia 1 (Kai 60)
HT: 0-0

Sunday, March 27

Mar 27 - Cluj-Napoca
Romania 0
Spain 0
Att: 30,000. **Ref:** Buquet (Fra)
Romania: Tatarusanu - Sapunaru, Chiriches, D Grigore, Filip, Pintilii (Ropotan 90), Hoban, Popa (Torje 60), Stanciu (Sanmartean 84), Stancu (Ivan 66), Andone (Rusescu 73).
Spain: Casillas - Mario, Pique (Nacho 51), Bartra, Jordi Alba, Sergi Roberto (Fabregas 59), Koke, Pedro (Mata 66), Silva (Morata 78), Nolito (Isco 46), Paco Alcacer (Aduriz 59).

Mar 27 - Honiara
Solomon Islands 1 (Lea'alafa 1)
Papua New Guinea 2 (Gunemba 29, Foster pen 82)
HT: 1-1

Mar 27 - Bangkok
Thailand 0
South Korea 1 (Suk Hyun-jun 4)
HT: 0-1. **Att:** 18,900. **Ref:** Ng (HK)
Thailand: Sinthaweechai - Theerathon (Nurul 71), Kroekrit (Chenrop 46), Jakkaphan (Pokkhao 46), Sanrawat (Sarach 46), Adisak, Mongkol (Peerapat 52), Prakit (Chanathip 46), Narubadin, Pratum, Tanaboon.
South Korea: Kim Seung-gyu - Kim Chang-soo, Park Joo-ho, Jung Woo-young (Han Kook-young 66), Suk Hyun-jun (Hwang Ui-jo 86), Nam Tae-hee, Hong Jeong-ho (Kwak Tae-hwi 46), Ki Sung-yueng (Ju Se-jong 66), Lee Jeong-hyeop (Lee Chung-yong 71), Kim Young-gwon (Kim Kee-hee 46), Koh Myong-jin.

Monday, March 28

Mar 28 - Paola, Malta
Andorra 0
Moldova 1 (Armas 45+1)
HT: 0-1. **Att:** 50. **Ref:** Casanova (SaM)
Andorra: Pol - C Martinez (Ayala 66), Vales, San Nicolas (Gomes 86), Lima, Pujol (Peppe 74), M Vieira (E Garcia 80), Moreira (Clemente 84), Lorenzo (Rodrigues 86), Rodriguez, M Garcia.
Moldova: Cebanu - Armas, Carp, Golovatenco (V Andronic 89), Epureanu, Ionita, Gatcan, Antoniuc (Mihaliov 86), Dedov, Cemirtan (Ginsari 77), Ilescu (Cascaval 57).

Mar 28 - Marbella, Spain
Liechtenstein 2 (Gubser 73, Wolfinger 90+3)
Faroe Islands 3 (B Olsen 6, Edmundsson 43, Vatnhamar 58)
HT: 0-2. **Ref:** Gil Manzano (Spa)
Liechtenstein: Jehle - Kaufmann, Salanovic (Kuhne 86), Marcel Buchel (Gubser 69), Wieser (Ospelt 90), Wolfinger, Burgmeier (Brandle 71), Martin Buchel, Yildiz (Sele 87), Rechsteiner, Polverino.
Faroe Islands: Nielsen (Gestsson 16) - B Hansen, Gregersen (J Davidsen 79), Sorensen, Nattestad, Hansson, Bartalsstovu (Frederiksberg 90), B Olsen (P Justinussen 87), Jensen, Vatnhamar (Naes 68), Edmundsson (K Olsen 79).

Mar 28 - Belfast
Northern Ireland 1 (Washington 42)
Slovenia 0
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 13,500. **Ref:** Tohver (Est)
Northern Ireland: Carroll - McAuley (A Hughes 46), Evans, Cathcart, Smith (C McLaughlin 71), McNair (McGinn 79), Davis, Norwood, Ferguson (Dallas 60), Ward (K Lafferty 60), Washington (Magennis 70).
Slovenia: Oblak - Cesar (Aljaz Struna 80), Jokic, Samardzic, Skubic (Stojanovic 62), Birsa, Ilicic (Novakovic 46), Krhin, Kurtic (Vrhovec 46), Verbic (Kirm 62), Bezjak (Crnic 75).

Mar 28 - Freetown
Sierra Leone 1 (U Bangura pen 13)
Gabon 0
HT: 1-0

Mar 28 - Kiev
Ukraine 1 (Yarmolenko 28)
Wales 0
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 20,000. **Ref:** Gozubuyuk (Hol)
Ukraine: Pyatov - Fedetskyi, Kucher, Khacheridi, Shevchuk, Stepanenko, Rotan (Sydorchuk 59), Kovalenko, Yarmolenko, Harmash, Zozulya.
Wales: Hennessey - Chester, A Williams (Richards 65), B Davies, Gunter, Allen, Huws (Ledley 80), N Taylor (Bradshaw 72), J Williams (Vokes 61), Church (MacDonald 61), Lawrence (Henley 72).

Tuesday, March 29

Mar 29 - Vienna
Austria 1 (Junuzovic 22)
Turkey 2 (Calhanoglu 43, Arda 56)
HT: 1-1. **Att:** 26,700. **Ref:** Gil (Pol)
Austria: Ozcan - Klein (Garics 78), Hinteregger, Dragovic (Prodl 59), Fuchs, Ilsanker, Alaba (Schopf 78), Burgstaller (Jantscher 67), Junuzovic (Hinterseer 73), Arnautovic, Okotie (Janko 67).
Turkey: Volkan Babacan - Gokhan Gonul (Sener 46), Ahmet, Mehmet Topal, Caner (Ismail 69), Selcuk Inan, Calhanoglu (Malli 73), Ozan, Ozyakup (Volkan Sen 46; Oztekin 80), Arda, Tosun (Sahin 86).

Mar 29 - London
England 1 (Vardy 41)
Holland 2 (Janssen pen 51, Narsingh 77)
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 82,835. **Ref:** Mateu Lahoz (Spa)
England: Forster - Walker, Smalling (Jagielka 70), Stones, Rose (Clyne 58), Milner (Alli 82), Drinkwater (Dier 85), Vardy, Barkley, Lallana (Kane 70), Sturridge (Walcott 58).
Holland: Zoet - Veltman, Bruma, Blind, Willems (Van Aanholt 82), Wijnaldum, Bazoer (Van Ginkel 79), Afellay, Depay, Janssen (Clasie 90), Promes (Narsingh 37).

Mar 29 - Tallinn
Estonia 0
Serbia 1 (Kolarov 81)
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 2,858. **Ref:** Hunter (NI)
Estonia: Aksalu - Teniste (Kams 60), Baranov, Jaager, Pikk, Mets, Antonov (Sappinen 86), Vassiljev, Zenjov (Gussev 82), Kallaste (S Puri 46), H Anier.
Serbia: Stojkovic - Ivanovic, Nikola Maksimovic (Spajic 46), S Rajkovic, Kolarov, Milivojevic (Nemanja Maksimovic 82), Matic (Brasanac 64), Kostic (Djuricic 75), Ljajic, Z Tosic (Sulejmani 87), A Mitrovic (Stojiljkovic 90).

Mar 29 - Paris
France 4 (Kante 8, Gignac 38, Payet 64, Coman 76)
Russia 2 (Kokorin 56, Zhirkov 68)
HT: 2-0. **Att:** 65,000. **Ref:** Thomson (Sco)
France: Lloris - Sagna, Varane, Sakho, Evra (Mathieu 46; Digne 54), Kante, L Diarra, Pogba (Sissoko 69), Griezmann (Payet 62), Gignac (Giroud 79), Martial (Coman 46).
Russia: Akinfeev (Lodygin 46) - Kuzmin, A Berezutsky, V Berezutsky, Zhirkov (Smolnikov 69), Golovin (Glushakov 79), Dzagoev, Kokorin (Smolov 80), Shirokov (Mamaev 69), Shatov (Samedov 88), Dzyuba.

Mar 29 - Tbilisi
Georgia 1 (Okriashvili 38)
Kazakhstan 1 (Nurgaliyev 36)
HT: 1-1. **Ref:** Pisani (Mlt)
Georgia: Revishvili - Lobzhanidze (Vatsadze 89), Kashia, Amisulashvili (Kverkvelia 46), Navalovski, Kankava, Aburjania (Kvekveskiri 78), Okriashvili, Chanturia (Kacharava 46), Ananidze (Kenia 78), Kazaishvili.
Kazakhstan: Loria (Plotnikov 46) - Beisebekov, Logvinenko, Shchetkin (Khizhnichenko 46), Nurgaliyev (Islamkhan 80), Maliy, Shomko, Kuat (Tagybergen 85), Smakov (Baizhanov 74), Muzhikov (Konysbayev 65), Suyumbayev.

Mar 29 - Munich
Germany 4 (Kroos 24, Gotze 45, Hector 59, Ozil pen 75)
Italy 1 (El Shaarawy 83)
HT: 2-0. **Att:** 62,653. **Ref:** Drachta (Aut)
Germany: Ter Stegen - Rudiger, Mustafi, Hummels, Rudy, Hector (Ginter 85), Ozil, Kroos (Kramer 90), T Muller (Can 69), Draxler (Volland 85), Gotze (Reus 61).
Italy: Buffon - Darmian, Bonucci (Ranocchia 63), Acerbi, Florenzi (De Silvestri 61), Giaccherini (El Shaarawy 68), Montolivo, Thiago Motta (Parolo 68), Bernardeschi, Insigne (Okaka 68), Zaza (Antonelli 78).

Mar 29 - Gibraltar
Gibraltar 0
Latvia 5 (Ikaunieks 46, 84, Dubra 53, Sabala 57, A Visnakovs 82)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Sant (Mlt)
Gibraltar: J Perez - Garcia (Yome 80), J Chipolina (Barnett 62), Sergeant (Hernandez 70), R Casciaro (Olivero-Mascarenhas 80), R Chipolina, Payas, K Casciaro, Walker, Cabrera (Guiling 62), Bosio (Montovio 70).
Latvia: Vanins - Maksimenko (Kurakins 72), Dubra, Laizans (Lazdins 46), Gabovs, Rudnevs, Sabala (Karasausks 81), Gorkss (Jagodinskis 76), Ikaunieks, Tarasovs (Zjuzins 46), Savalnieks (A Visnakovs 12)

Mar 29 - Piraeus
Greece 2 (Fortounis pen 19, 31)
Iceland 3 (Traustason 34, Ingason 70, Sigthorsson 81)
HT: 2-1. **Att:** 4,000. **Ref:** Estrada Fernandez (Spa)
Greece: Kapino - Siovas (Tzavellas 81), Moras, Oikonomou, Stafylidis, Torosidis (Petsos 76), Holebas, Tziolis, Fortounis (Tachtsidis 76), Papazoglou (Vellios 46), Karelis (Diamantakos 46).
Iceland: Kristinsson (Halldorsson 46) - B Saevarsson, Hermannsson, Ingason, A Skulason, Traustason (T Bjarnason 46), A Gunnarsson (B Bjarnason 46), Hallfredsson (G Sigurdsson 46), J Gudmundsson, Kjartansson (Sigthorsson 61), Bodvarsson (Finnbogason 82).

Mar 29 - Luxembourg
Luxembourg 0
Albania 2 (Sadiku 63, Cikalleshi 75)
HT: 0-0. **Ref:** Schorgenhofer (Aut)
Luxembourg: Joubert - Delgado (Sacras 86), Chanot, Malget, Jans, Deville (C Martins 62), Philipps, Gerson (Payal 71), Da Mota (Moris 45+2), Bensi (S Thill 90), Joachim.
Sent off: Joubert 45.
Albania: Berisha (Shehi 60) - Ajeti (Roshi 69), Aliji (Lenjani 60), Djimsiti, Veseli, Kukeli (Kace 46), Basha, Memushaj (Rashica 60), Gashi, Shala (Sadiku 60), Cikalleshi.

Mar 29 - Skopje
Macedonia 0
Bulgaria 2 (Rangelov 65, Tonev 87)
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 7,000. **Ref:** Jorgji (Alb)
Macedonia: Dimitrievski - Ristovski (Siljanovski 74), Sikov, Ristevski (Cikarski 74), Zhuta, Gligorov, Stjepanovic (Alimi 61), Ibraimi (Nestorovski 76), Pandev, Trickovski, Jahovic (Kostovski 61).
Bulgaria: Mitrev - Terziev, Bodurov, Bozhikov, S Popov, Dyakov, Chochev, M Aleksandrov, Marcelinho (Delev 76), I Popov (I Ivanov 90), Rangelov (Tonev 85).

Mar 29 - Malacca
Malaysia 0
Macau 0

Mar 29 - Podgorica
Montenegro 0
Belarus 0
Att: 5,000. **Ref:** Grujic (Ser)
Montenegro: Poleksic - Marusic, Basa (Sofranac 46), Simic, Tomasevic, N Vukcevic, Nikolic, Rodic (Grbic 70), Bakic (Zoric 74), Mugosa (Raicevic 56), Beciraj.
Belarus: Gorbunov - Martynovich, Shitov (Begunov 75), Polyakov, Politevich, Kornilenko, Volodko, Krivets (Bressan 82), Kislyak (Dragun 67), Maevski, Kalachev (Balanovich 61).
Sent off: Kornilenko 9.

Mar 29 - Oslo
Norway 2 (Berget 57, Johansen 83)
Finland 0
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 4,675. **Ref:** Doyle (RoI)
Norway: Nyland (A Hansen 46) - Elabdellaoui, Hovland, Strandberg, Aleesami, Nordtveit (Johansen 61), Skjelbred (Selnaes 79), Odegaard (Jenssen 46), Gulbrandsen (Berget 46), Valon Berisha, Diomande (Soderlund 46).
Finland: Maenpaa (Joronen 46) - Jalasto (Uronen 79), Toivio, Arajuuri, Moren (T Vayrynen 86), Arkivuo (Raitala 38), P Hetemaj, Sparv, Lod (Schuller 46), R Eremenko, Pukki (Hamalainen 63).

Mar 29 - Leiria
Portugal 2 (Nani 20, Cristiano Ronaldo 40)
Belgium 1 (R Lukaku 62)
HT: 2-0. **Att:** 21,157. **Ref:** Klossner (Swi)
Portugal: Rui Patricio - Cedric, Raphael Guerreiro, Jose Fonte, Pepe, Adrien Silva (Renato Sanches 46), Danilo Pereira (Danny 87), Joao Mario (Bernardo Silva 46), Nani (Eder 60), Andre Gomes (William Carvalho 74), Cristiano Ronaldo (Quaresma 60).
Belgium: Courtois - Vermaelen, Denayer (Boyata 86), G Gillet (J Lukaku 59), Lombaerts, Fellaini (Dembele 79), Nainggolan, Witsel, Chadli, R Lukaku, Mertens (Batshuayi 67).

Mar 29 - Dublin
Republic of Ireland 2 (Long pen 22, McClean pen 24)
Slovakia 2 (Stoch 14, McShane og 45)
HT: 2-2. **Att:** 30,217. **Ref:** Nielsen (Nor)
Rep Ireland: Elliot (Randolph 16) - Christie, O'Shea (Pearce 46), McShane, Ward (Hayes 79), O'Kane (Pilkington 66), Whelan, McCarthy, Hoolahan (McGeady 73), Long (Brady 46), McClean.
Slovakia: Kozacik - Pekarik, Skrtel, Salata, Svento (Tesak 88), Gregus (Hrosovsky 74), Sabo (Duda 64), Sestak (Mak 64), Hamsik, Stoch (Weiss 64), Vittek (Nemec 64).

Mar 29 - Glasgow
Scotland 1 (Ritchie 8)
Denmark 0
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 18,385. **Ref:** Moen (Nor)
Scotland: Gordon - Whittaker, Greer, Hanley, Tierney (Mulgrew 46), Ritchie (Burke 82), Brown, McGinn, Maloney (Bridcutt 68), S Fletcher (Anya 46), Griffiths (C Martin 59).
Denmark: Schmeichel (Lossl 46) - Kjaer, A Christensen, Agger (Sviatchenko 64), Dalsgaard, Hojbjerg, Delaney, Durmisi, Eriksen (Schone 81), Y Poulsen (Braithwaite 46), N Jorgensen.

Mar 29 - Stockholm
Sweden 1 (Berg 14)
Czech Republic 1 (Vydra 26)
HT: 1-1. **Att:** 18,475. **Ref:** Nijhuis (Hol)
Sweden: Isaksson - Salomonsson (Lustig 81), Granqvist, Lindelof (Milosevic 65), M Olsson, Durmaz (S Larsson 46), Lewicki (Wernbloom 63), Kallstrom (Hiljemark 46), Forsberg, Ibrahimovic, Berg (Guidetti 46).
Czech Republic: Vaclik - Gebre Selassie, Sivok (Brabec 59), Suchy, Pudil, Darida (Frydek 59), Marecek (Rada 72), Skalak (Sural 59), Kolar (Dockal 86), Krejci, Vydra (Necid 72).

Mar 29 - Zurich
Switzerland 0
Bosnia-Herzegovina 2 (Dzeko 14, Pjanic 57)
HT: 0-1. **Att:** 17,000. **Ref:** Delferiere (Blg)
Switzerland: Sommer - Lichtsteiner (Lang 65), Schar (Klose 46), Senderos, Rodriguez (Moubandje 66), Fernandes (Embolo 46), Xhaka, Kasami (Tarashaj 73), Steffen, Mehmedi (Zuffi 46), Seferovic.
Bosnia-Herzegovina: Begovic (Buric 63) - O Vranjes, Spahic (Cocalic 79), Zukanovic (Graovac 85), Kolasinac, Besic, Visca (Susic 51), Lulic, Pjanic (Duljevic 73), Ibisevic (Hadzic 66), Dzeko.

Club football

EUROPE

UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

1st knockout round

1st legs

Feb16
Benfica (Por) 1 (Jonas 90+1)
Zenit St Petersburg (Rus) 0
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 48,615. **Ref:** Rocchi (Ita)
Sent off: Criscito (Zenit) 90

Feb16
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 2 (Ibrahimovic 39, Cavani 78)
Chelsea (Eng) 1 (Mikel 45+1)
HT: 1-1. **Att:** 46,505. **Ref:** Velasco Carballo (Spa)

Feb17
Gent (Blg) 2 (Kums 80, Coulibaly 89)
Wolfsburg (Ger) 3 (Draxler 44, 54, Kruse 60)
HT: 0-1. **Att:** 19,978. **Ref:** Moen (Nor)

Feb17
Roma (Ita) 0
Real Madrid (Spa) 2 (Cristiano Ronaldo 57, Jese 86)
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 55,612. **Ref:** Kralovec (CzR)

Feb 23
Arsenal (Eng) 0
Barcelona (Spa) 2 (Messi 71, pen 83)
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 59,889. **Ref:** Cakir (Tur)

Feb 23
Juventus (Ita) 2 (Dybala 63, Sturaro 76)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 2 (Muller 43, Robben 55)
HT: 0-1. **Att:** 41,332. **Ref:** Atkinson (Eng)

Feb 24
Dynamo Kiev (Ukr) 1 (Buyalskyy 58)
Manchester City (Eng) 3 (Aguero 15, Silva 40, Toure 90)
HT: 0-2. **Att:** 53,691. **Ref:** Mateu Lahoz (Spa)

Feb 24
PSV Eindhoven (Hol) 0
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 0
Att: 34,948. **Ref:** Orsato (Ita)
Sent off: Pereiro (PSV) 68

2nd legs

Mar 8
Real Madrid 2 (Cristiano Ronaldo 64, Rodriguez 68)
Roma 0
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 76,654. **Ref:** Marciniak (Pol)
Real Madrid 4-0 on agg

Mar 8
Wolfsburg 1 (Schurrle 74)
Gent 0
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 23,457. **Ref:** Skomina (Sln)
Wolfsburg 4-2 on agg

Mar 9
Chelsea 1 (Diego Costa 27)
Paris Saint-Germain 2 (Rabiot 16, Ibrahimovic 67)
HT: 1-1. **Att:** 37,591. **Ref:** Brych (Ger)
Paris Saint-Germain 4-2 on agg

Mar 9
Zenit St Petersburg 1 (Hulk 69)
Benfica 2 (Gaitan 85, Talisca 90+6)
HT: 0-0. **Att:** 17,688. **Ref:** Kassai (Hun)
Benfica 3-1 on agg

Mar15
Atletico Madrid 0
PSV Eindhoven 0
Aet. **Att:** 50,135. **Ref:** Clattenburg (Eng)
Agg 0-0; Atletico Madrid 8-7 on pens

Mar15
Manchester City 0
Dynamo Kiev 0
Att: 43,630. **Ref:** Hategan (Rom)
Manchester City 3-1 on agg

Mar16
Barcelona 3 (Neymar 18, Suarez 65, Messi 88)
Arsenal 1 (El Nenny 51)
HT: 1-0. **Att:** 76,092. **Ref:** Karasev (Rus)
Barcelona 5-1 on agg

Mar16
Bayern Munich 4 (Lewandowski 73, Muller 90+1, Thiago 108, Coman 110)
Juventus 2 (Pogba 5, Cuadrado 28)
Aet. **HT:** 0-2. **90mins:** 2-2. **Att:** 70,000.
Ref: Eriksson (Swe)
Bayern Munich 6-4 on agg

EUROPA LEAGUE

2nd knockout round

1st legs - Mar10; 2nd legs - Mar17
Athletic Bilbao (Spa) v Valencia (Spa)
1-0, 1-2 (agg 2-2, Athletic Bilbao on away goals)
Basle (Swi) v Sevilla (Spa)
0-0, 0-3 (agg 0-3)
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) v Tottenham Hotspur (Eng)
3-0, 2-1 (agg 5-1)
Fenerbahce (Tur) v Sporting Braga (Por)
1-0, 1-4 (agg 2-4)
Liverpool (Eng) v Manchester United (Eng)
2-0, 1-1 (agg 3-1)
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) v Anderlecht (Blg)
3-1, 1-0 (agg 4-1)
Sparta Prague (CzR) v Lazio (Ita)
1-1, 3-0 (agg 4-1)
Villarreal (Spa) v Bayer Leverkusen (Ger)
2-0, 0-0 (agg 2-0)

CONCACAF

CONCACAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Semi-finals

1st legs - Mar15/16; 2nd legs - Apr 5
Queretaro (Mex) v Tigres (Mex)
0-0, 0-2 (agg 0-2)
Santos Laguna (Mex) v America (Mex)
0-0, 0-1 (aet) (agg 0-1)

BERMUDA

2015-16 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dandy Town (C)	18	14	2	2	59	19	44
Robin Hood	18	10	2	6	37	26	32
Pembroke	18	7	6	5	36	28	27
North Village	18	7	6	5	29	23	27
Boulevard	18	6	6	6	34	33	24
Dev Cougars	18	7	2	9	24	27	23
Somerset T	18	5	7	6	26	33	22
Dev Colts	18	4	7	7	32	42	19
S'thampton (R)	18	3	8	7	25	45	17
Hamilton (R)	18	2	4	12	23	49	10

Previous champions (most recent)

2011-12	Dandy Town
2012-13	Devonshire Cougars
2013-14	Dandy Town
2014-15	Somerset Trojans

DOMINICA

2015-16 – FINAL

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dublanc (C)	14	12	0	2	30	12	36
Bath Estate	14	10	2	2	41	16	32
Harlem Utd	14	8	3	3	36	13	27
Exodus	14	7	4	3	32	20	25
Sagicor SE	14	6	1	7	20	23	19
Nthn Bombers	14	3	1	10	19	33	10
Middleham	14	2	3	9	15	33	9
Aicons (R)	14	1	0	13	7	50	3

Previous champions (most recent)

2011-12	Harlem United
2012-13	Bath Estate
2013-14	Northern Bombers
2014-15	Exodus

AFRICA

CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

1st round

1st legs - Mar12/13; 2nd legs - Mar19/20
Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby) v Al Hilal (Sud)
1-0, 1-2 (agg 2-2, Al Ahli Tripoli on away goals)
APR (Rwa) v Young Africans (Tan)
1-2, 1-1 (agg 2-3)
AS Vita (DRC) v Ferroviario Maputo (Moz)
1-0, 1-1 (agg 2-1)
Club Africain (Tun) v MO Bejaia (Alg)
1-0, 0-2 (agg 1-2)
Enyimba (Nga) v Vital'O (Bdi)
5-1, 1-2 (agg 6-3)
Etoile du Congo (Con) v ES Setif (Alg)
1-1, 2-4 (agg 3-5)
Kaizer Chiefs (SAf) v ASEC Abidjan (IvC)
0-1, 0-0 (agg 0-1)
Mamelodi Sundowns (SAf) v AC Leopards (Con)
2-0, 1-1 (agg 3-1)
Olympique Khouribga (Mor) v Etoile Sahel (Tun)
1-1, 0-2 (agg 1-3)
Recreativo do Libolo (Ang) v Al Ahly (Egy)
0-0, 0-2 (agg 0-2)
Saint George (Eth) v TP Mazembe (DRC)
2-2, 0-1 (agg 2-3)
Stade Malien (Mli) v Coton Sport (Cam)
2-0, 0-1 (agg 2-1)
Union Douala (Cam) v Zamalek (Egy)
0-1, 0-2 (agg 0-3)
Warri Wolves (Nga) v Al Merrikh (Sud)
0-1, 0-1 (agg 0-2)
Wydad Casablanca (Mor) v CNaPS Sport (Mad)
5-1, 1-2 (agg 6-3)
Zesco United (Zam) v Horoya (Gui)
4-1, 0-2 (agg 4-3)

CONFEDERATION CUP

1st round

1st legs - Mar11-13; 2nd legs - Mar18-20
Africa Sports (IvC) v ENPPI (Egy) 0-2, 1-4 (agg 1-6); Al Ittihad (Lby) v Medeama (Gha) 1-0, 0-2 (agg 1-2); Atletico Olympic (Bdi) v CF Mounana (Gab) 0-2, 0-3 (agg 0-5); Bidvest Wits (SAf) v Azam (Tan) 0-3, 3-4 (agg 3-7); Harare City (Zim) v Zanaco (Zam) 1-2, 1-3 (agg 2-5); Kawkab Marrakech (Mor) v Barrack Young Controllers II (Lbr) 3-0, 0-2 (agg 3-2); MC Oran (Alg) v SC Gagnoa (IvC) 2-0, 2-2 (agg 4-2); Misr El Makasa (Egy) v Don Bosco (DRC) 3-1, 0-1 (agg 3-2); Nasarawa United (Nga) v CS Constantine (Alg) 1-0, 1-4 (agg 2-4); Renaissance (Chd) v Esperance (Tun) 0-2, 0-5 (agg 0-7); Sagrada Esperanca (Ang) v Liga Desportiva Maputo (Moz) 1-0, 1-1 (agg 2-1); SC Villa (Uga) v JKU (Zan) 4-0, 1-0 (agg 5-0); St Eloi Lupopo (DRC) v Al Ahly Shendi (Sud) 2-1, 0-1 (agg 2-2, Al Ahly Shendi on away goals); Stade Gabesien (Tun) v AS Kaloum (Gui) 2-1, 0-0 (agg 2-1); UMS de Loum (Cam) v FUS Rabat (Mor) 1-1, 1-2 (agg 2-3); Vita Club Mokanda (Con) v Police (Rwa) 0-0, 1-0 (agg 1-0)

OCEANIA

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

2015-16 Championship Final

Mar 19: Hekari United 0 Lae City Dwellers 2.

Previous champions (most recent)

2011-12	Hekari United
2013	Hekari United
2014	Hekari United
2015	Lae City Dwellers

TAHITI

2015-16 Championship Final

Apr 1: Tefana 1 Central 1 (aet, Tefana 5-4 on pens).

Previous champions (most recent)

2011-12	Dragon
2012-13	Dragon
2013-14	Pirae
2014-15	Tefana

KEY TO TABLES
(C) = champions
(R) = relegated
(Q) = qualified for next stage

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EDITOR Gavin Hamilton
ASSISTANT EDITOR Nich Hills
DESIGN DIRECTOR Kevin Eason
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EDITORIAL
Pinehurst 2, Pinehurst Road, Farnborough Business Park, Farnborough, Hants GU14 7BF
Tel: +44 (0) 20 3148 4817
Fax: +44 (0) 20 3148 8130

ADVERTISING AND SPONSORSHIP
Tadeyo Akitoye, Richard Torey
Tel: +44 (0) 20 3148 2515
+44 (0) 20 3148 2823
E-mail: tadeyo.akitoye@timeinc.com, richard.torey@timeinc.com

PRODUCTION MANAGER Tom Jennings
PUBLISHING DIRECTOR Hamish Dawson
MANAGING DIRECTOR Oswin Grady

Advertising +44 (0) 20 3148 2503
+44 (0) 20 3148 2823
Back issues +44 (0) 20 3148 4816
Binders +44 (0) 20 3148 4816

International licensing enquiries
+44 (0) 20 314 85490
E-mail: bianca.hamilton-foster@timeinc.com

Time Inc.

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SUBSCRIPTIONS DEPARTMENT
Rockwood House, 9-17 Perrymount Road, Haywards Heath, West Sussex RH16 3DH, England Tel: +44 (0) 1444 475 675

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UEFA

KEIR RADNEDGE

Perception, perception, perception...

Infantino in a flap over fallout to the 'Panama Papers'

Unforgivable incomprehension born of arrogance. That seems the only way to sum up the response from UEFA, its commercial agent TEAM Marketing and Gianni Infantino to the revelation from the "Panama Papers" about the Ecuadorian television-rights deal.

Football's commercial dealings may not be comparable to the manner in which some of the world's political leaders and their cronies shifted their wealth to offshore accounts set up in Panama.

And as emphasised by all the articles which have flooded the media since the start of April, controlling an offshore company and/or account is not illegal.

However, the potential for tax avoidance or evasion and secrecy is guaranteed to raise suspicions. Not only that, but successive leadership and governance scandals in world sport mean the public in general have no trust whatsoever in the presidents, chairmen, general secretaries and secretary-generals.

The men and woman concerned may be as pure as the driven snow, but the public will not believe it. Bad luck for the great and good. That's life. Accept it. And, better late than never, do what must be done to clean up your sport's act.

Yet after all the fuss and furore it seems, almost unbelievably, that they still don't get it.

No good blaming "sad journalism", as did UEFA, on the reports concerning Infantino's role in the original deal. No good TEAM Marketing's Martin Wagner self-righteously denouncing "a particularly shameful attempt by certain sections of the media to cast aspersions on the reputation of the FIFA president by conducting a baseless public trial by innuendo". No good the new FIFA president himself whingeing about "presentation [which] is a disgrace".

Everyone in a position of influence during the years in which such as Ricardo Teixeira and Jack Warner ripped off football in plain sight bears some of the corporate responsibility for acquiescence.

Yes, that includes FIFA and the members of its executive committee, now the FIFA Council. Yes, that includes the confederations, including UEFA. And, yes, that includes their commercial and marketing advisers, including TEAM Marketing.

The Infantino case arose after the leaks revealed Panama-based Cross Trading, controlled by directors subsequently indicted in the FIFAGate scandal, had made a significant profit on the resale of Champions League TV rights. The initial sale was signed off in 2006 by two UEFA directors – including Infantino, who was head of the European federation's legal division.

Cross Trading paid $111,000 and sold on the rights to the Ecuadorian broadcaster Teleamazonas for $311,700. In March 2007, Cross Trading paid $28,000 for the TV rights to the UEFA Cup and UEFA Super Cup, and sold those to Teleamazonas for $126,200.

The vast gap between the sale and re-sale figures was enough to prompt the Office of the Swiss Attorney General to launch an inquiry into "suspicion of criminal mismanagement" and police raided the offices of UEFA and TEAM in search of relevant documentation.

> Those concerned may be as pure as the driven snow, but the public will not believe it

The labyrinthine confusion of individuals, agents and offshore companies is being revealed gradually as the crooked deals unravel. The Paraguayan and Uruguayan judicial authorities are the ones in South America which have shown greatest appetite to follow the money.

Hence, Eugenio Figueredo – for years the football godfather of Montevideo – is squirming in court; hence the Uruguayans want to lay their hands on Gorka Villar, who Figueredo has blamed for blackmailing Uruguayan clubs into silence over the commercial share-out from CONMEBOL's club tournaments.

Villar had been legal director then secretary-general of CONMEBOL and is suspected of having sneaked into its office late one night to wipe clean as many hard drives as possible and destroy documents.

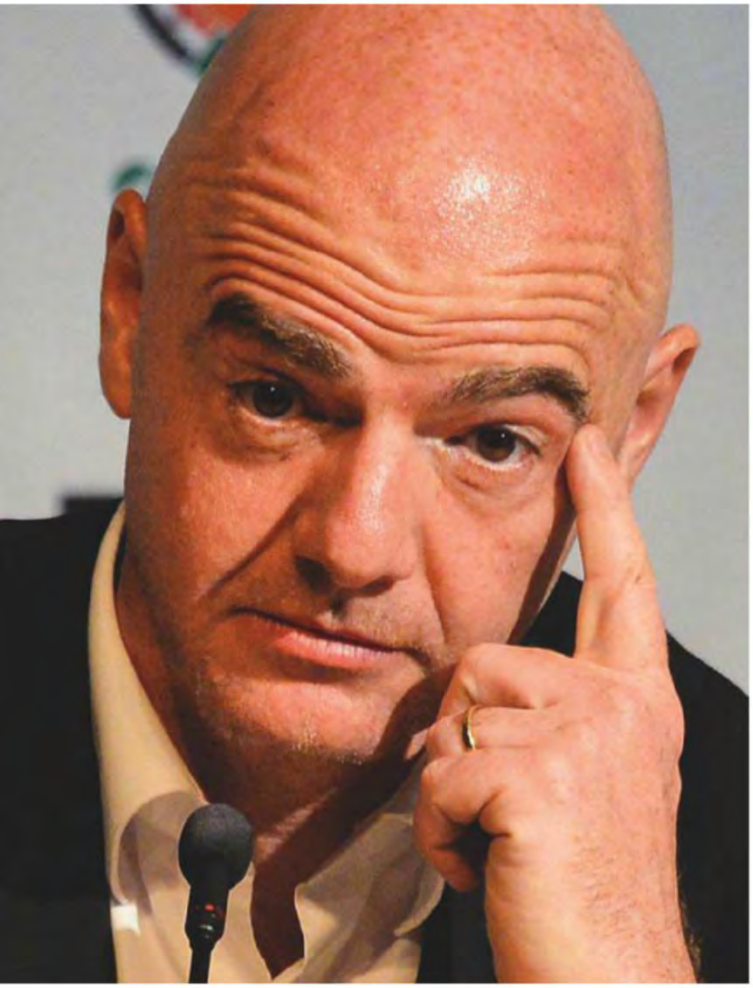
Figueredo has been trying to lay as much blame as possible on Villar who, he claims, was acting under the tacit protection of his father, Angel Maria Villar, who is the long-serving head of the Spanish federation and vice-president of both FIFA and UEFA.

Where will it all end?

Accusations...a flag-waving fan wearing a Figueredo mask

Named...Gianni Infantino

Squirming..Uruguayan Eugenio Figueredo, the "football godfather of Montevideo"



Headless UEFA in a mess

UEFA is something of a mess right now, as it heads for its annual congress in Budapest. With no president and general secretary, it's headless, leaderless.

No wonder the big clubs have seized the moment to put more pressure on UEFA to find a way to grant them an even bigger slice of the Champions League revenues.

Michel Platini, with an eye on voting support, had always championed increased access for clubs from the middle-of-the-road nations to the Champions League. The likes of Real Madrid, Bayern Munich and Barcelona had accepted the perceived nuisance of group stage trips to Romania, Belarus, Bosnia-Herzegovina and suchlike as the price to be paid.

But every time UEFA and the clubs start thinking ahead to the next three-year television deal so the games begin. Just as Milan's Silvio Berlusconi once frightened UEFA with the Media Partners proposal for a super league, so a nucleus of big clubs are now talking about a revival in stage whispers to ensure UEFA hears.

While Platini remains "innocent until proved guilty", UEFA is in a weak position, lacking political direction and administrative certainty. And while the cat is away the mice are at play. Hence the decision to use Platini's hated goal-line technology at the Finals of the Champions League and Europa League, as well as at Euro 2016.

It's time Platini took the honourable, self-sacrificial step in the interests of European football and resigned.

The last thing that UEFA needs right now is a lame-duck president.

Lame-duck president... Michel Platini

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

HOW IT WORKS

Every month, journalists from each member of the European Sports Media group select their first XI based on the best individual performances from Europe's top competitions. For details of how each ESM member voted, visit worldsoccer.com/esm11

MARCH

ESM – EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

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MARCH 18-APRIL 12, 2016

Global diary

A comprehensive record of recent events around the world

Friday March 18

FIFA: It is announced that a fourth substitute during extra-time will be tested at this year's Olympic Games and Club World Cup.
GREECE: FIFA warns the Greek Football Federation to reinstate the Greek Cup, which was cancelled by the government following crowd trouble at the PAOK v Olympiakos semi-final, or risk sanctions that could include a European ban.

Saturday March 19

MOROCCO: Two fans die and 49 are injured as violence flares during Raja's 2-1 win at home to Chabab Rif Al Hoceima in Casablanca.
USA: LA Galaxy beat San Jose Earthquakes 3-1 in the California Classico, while Vancouver Whitecaps win 2-1 at Seattle Sounders.

Sunday March 20

BELGIUM: Standard Liege win the Belgian Cup for a seventh time, beating Club Brugge 2-1 in the Final.
CHILE: Universidad de Chile hold league leaders Colo Colo to a goalless draw in the Santiago derby.
COLOMBIA: Atletico Nacional come from a goal down to draw 1-1 at local rivals Medellin, while Millonarios take bragging rights in Bogota by beating Santa Fe 2-0.
DR CONGO: CAF Champions League holders TP Mazembe beat Saint George of Ethiopia 1-0 to win 3-2 on aggregate and progress to the last 16.
ENGLAND: Marcus Rashford gets the winner as Manchester United beat Manchester City 1-0 and, at 18 years and 141 days, is the youngest goalscorer in a Manchester derby since Sammy McIlroy in 1971.
FRANCE: Already crowned Ligue 1 champions, Paris Saint-Germain lose at home in the competition for the first time since May 2014, going down 2-0 to Monaco.
GREECE: Panthrakikos and Kalloni are relegated from the Super League after losing 1-0 at home to Atromitos and 3-0 at PAOK respectively.
HOLLAND: Ajax leapfrog PSV at the top of the table with a 2-0 win in Eindhoven as the hosts fail to score for the first time in 55 league games.
ITALY: Torino's Andrea Belotti beats Gianluigi Buffon to end the keeper's Serie A record of 973 minutes without conceding a goal as Juventus win the Turin derby 4-1.
SPAIN: Gareth Bale is on target in Real Madrid's 4-0 win over Sevilla to become La Liga's all-time record British goalscorer with 43.
TURKEY: The Istanbul derby between Galatasaray and Fenerbahce is called off following a bomb attack in the city the previous day which killed five people.

Monday March 21

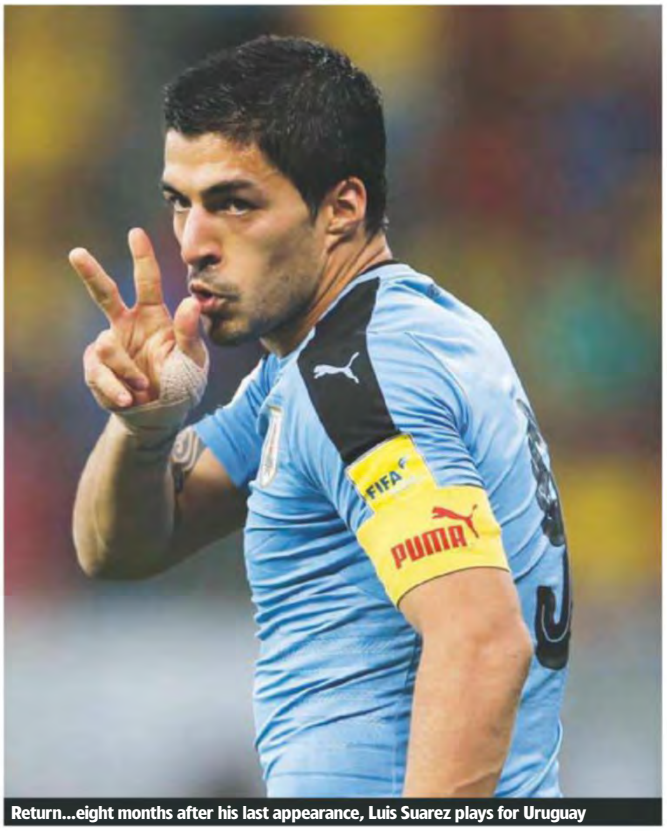
ARGENTINA: Racing record back-to-back 6-3 away wins in the league, beating Atletico Rafaela two weeks after the same scoreline at Union Santa Fe.

Tuesday March 22

ENGLAND: Premier League leaders Leicester City are to take part in the pre-season International Champions Cup, during which they will face Barcelona in Sweden.
GERMANY: Werder Bremen's Papy Djilobodji, who is on loan from Chelsea, is banned for three games – later reduced on appeal to two – for making a throat-slitting gesture towards Mainz winger Pablo De Blasis during Saturday's 1-1 draw.

Wednesday March 23

AFRICAN NATIONS CUP: Sao Tome e Principe and Guinea-Bissau record rare competitive wins, beating Libya (2-1) and Kenya (1-0) in qualifying games respectively.
BELGIUM: Tuesday's friendly against Portugal at Brussels' King Baudouin Stadium is moved following the previous day's bomb attacks which killed more than 30 people in the capital. The game will now be played in the Portuguese city of Leiria.



Return...eight months after his last appearance, Luis Suarez plays for Uruguay

Thursday March 24

CHILE: Goalkeeper and captain Claudio Bravo becomes the first player to win 100 caps for Chile – although Argentina spoil the celebrations with a 2-1 World Cup qualifying victory.
COMOROS: The minnows win a competitive international for the first time, beating Botswana 1-0 in an African Nations Cup qualifier.
ENGLAND: Former Sunderland and England winger Adam Johnson is jailed for six years for grooming and sexual activity with a 15-year-old girl.
HOLLAND: Johann Cruyff passes away, aged 68, from lung cancer.
JORDAN: Harry Redknapp kicks off his career as an international coach with an 8-0 victory over Bangladesh in a World Cup qualifier.
PERU: Paolo Guerrero equals Teofilo Cubillas' national record with a 26th goal in the 2-2 draw with Venezuela.

Friday March 25

ARMENIA: The seventh-oldest European to play international football, keeper Roman Berezovski appears for the first seven minutes of Armenia's 0-0 draw with Belarus to win his 94th and final cap at the age of 41 years and 233 days.
HOLLAND: Play is halted in the 14th minute of Holland's 3-2 friendly loss

Violence...fans riot in Casablanca

to France in Amsterdam to honour Johan Cruyff.

LUXEMBOURG: At the age of 16 years and 50 days, Vincent Thill plays in the 3-0 loss to Bosnia and becomes Luxembourg's youngest-ever international.

TRINIDAD & TOBAGO: Levi Garcia, an 18-year-old winger with Dutch

Quality...Jamie Vardy (left) is on target

club AZ, appears at half-time and scores twice on his international debut as T&T beat St Vincent & the Grenadines 3-2.

URUGUAY: Luis Suarez scores on his return to international football, after a nine-game ban with a goal, in a 2-2 draw away to Brazil.

Saturday March 26

ENGLAND: Goals from Harry Kane, Jamie Vardy and Eric Dier see England come from 2-0 down to beat Germany 3-2 in Berlin.

Sunday March 27

ICELAND: IBV Vestmannaeyjar's Ugandan goalkeeper Abel Dhaira loses his battle against cancer and ➤

Africa

MARK GLEESON

Your country needs you

Europe-born Africans face difficult decisions

The international future of N'Golo Kante was the subject of much media deliberation, but the diminutive Leicester City midfielder had little hesitation when he finally got the call. Mali had made overtures to the 25-year-old, but he bided his time until France coach Didier Deschamps came knocking, explaining "it's a chance to play in the Euros".

Having to choose between two countries is a growing phenomenon in Europe, where many developing talents come from immigrant backgrounds and face a tug of the heart strings as well as a practical choice.

France may have won the tussle over Kante but recently one of its best young talents, Yassine Benzia, opted for Algeria after representing *Les Bleus* at every junior level. The north Africans wasted no time in tying down the 21-year-old Lille striker to their cause, handing him a first cap in March's African Nations Cup qualifier against Ethiopia.

Last year Morocco began a determined approach to obtaining quality talent for their national team as they look ahead to the next African Nations Cup and World Cup finals. And an aggressive mission to persuade players of Moroccan heritage to commit to the Lions of Atlas has already had some success.

Enlisting Twente midfielder Hakim Ziyech was a huge coup as the 23-year-old threw his lot in with the north Africans rather than Holland, where he was born. He has been among the best players in the Eredivisie this season and Holland coach Danny Blind wanted to call him into the senior squad last June. But that plan was shelved when the Holland under-21 international was injured.

"The better I played, the less the attention on me was," says Ziyech. "I was only given a phone call after I said I wanted to go and play for Morocco.

"The Moroccan federation have been talking to me for years. I was born in Holland but my roots lie [in Morocco]. My father is buried there."

Under-21...Ziyech playing for Holland

Another Dutch-born youth

Senior...Hakim Ziyech (right) in action for Morocco

international recently recruited by Morocco is Oussama Tannane. Holland Under-21 coach Fred Grim spent hours trying to persuade the Saint-Etienne winger to remain with the country where he was raised, but the 22-year-old went with the land of his birth and made his Morocco debut in the away win against Cape Verde in March's African Nations Cup qualifier.

"We also can't promise these players that they will go on and play for Oranje," admits Grim. "We can't guarantee they will make the team."

Morocco did, however, lose out on Anwar El Ghazi when the Ajax striker was fast-tracked into the Dutch national team and handed a first senior cap in October, at the end of the Euro 2016 qualifiers.

And there is likely to be much more of this tying a player down – as Belgium did with Zakaria Bakkali when he was just 18 and Nigeria did recently with Arsenal teenager Alex Iwobi. Both were given a few minutes' game time in competitive internationals to forever tie up their options.

The case of Parisian-born winger Sofiane Boufal highlights the dilemmas faced by players who are being tugged to and fro in the battle for their international service. Last June he was called up by Morocco for an African Nations Cup qualifier against Libya, only to change his mind before the game.

"I badly mismanaged the episode there," says the Lille midfielder. "I'm still young, I just made a big mistake. In Morocco, there was a lot of pressure. I haven't given up the dream of playing for France."

Herve Renard was his coach at Lille at the start of that season and he suggested that Boufal would soon be wearing the French colours. "He has so much talent that he could walk into the France team now," said Renard. "He's a guy who is able to do exceptional things."

In March, the 22-year-old did finally make his debut for Morocco, having been persuaded to play by their new coach... Herve Renard. WS

dies at the age of 28.
KENYA: Rioting halts play with the hosts claiming Guinea Bissau's 81st-minute goal did not cross the line. Play is stopped for 30 minutes, as Kenya fans throw missiles at the visitors' bench and the fourth official before the game resumes and Guinea Bissau go on to win 1-0.
SPAIN: Iker Casillas equals Vitalijs Astafjevs of Latvia's European record of 166 international appearances in a 0-0 draw with Romania.

Monday March 28

EQUATORIAL GUINEA: Last year's African Nations Cup hosts, Equatorial Guinea become the first team to be eliminated from this year's qualifying tournament as they lose 1-0 in Mali.
NORTHERN IRELAND: A 1-0 victory over Slovenia sets a new national record of 10 games unbeaten.

Tuesday March 29

ENGLAND: Eric Black assumes temporary control as Aston Villa sack manager Remi Garde after only 147 days in charge.
FRANCE: Playing at the Stade de France for the first time since November's terrorist attacks, France beat Russia 4-2.
GERMANY: Three days after losing at home to England, Germany beat Italy 4-1 in Munich and record a first victory over the *Azzurri* since 1995.
JAPAN: Shinji Okazaki becomes only the fifth player to win 100 caps for Japan as they beat Syria 5-0.
NIGERIA: The three-time African champions fail to make the finals for a second consecutive tournament as they lose 1-0 to Egypt.

Wednesday March 30

SPAIN: Former Manchester United and England defender Gary Neville is sacked by Valencia after less than four months as coach. His number two, Pako Ayestaran, will take charge until the end of the season.

Thursday March 31

ENGLAND: Ivory Coast defender Emmanuel Eboue will appeal his sacking by Sunderland after being banned from all football-related activity for one year for failing to pay money owed to his former agent.
UKRAINE: Last season's Europa League runners-up Dnipro will be banned from the next UEFA competition they qualify for within the next three campaigns due to financial issues.

Friday April 1

PORTUGAL: Jonas becomes the first player in Europe to score 30 ➤

Brazil

TIM VICKERY

New season awaits...

...but same old problems remain

All the usual disclaimers apply to the 2016 Brazilian championship as a tournament played out of sync with the rest of the football world carries with it factors of unpredictability. The early stages, for example, coincide with the knockout phase of the Libertadores Cup, so those Brazilian teams involved are likely to field understrength sides for the first domestic games. Then there is the transfer window, which opens in the middle of the action, bringing with it considerable changes to the team line-ups – with more losses than gains.

And this year there is the added complication of the Copa America in June and the Olympic tournament in August. Add in vital World Cup qualifiers in September, October and November, and it is clear that some big names are likely to miss a large part of the action.

The major question confronting the Brazilian game is how long will clubs go on tolerating such a calendar? The fruit of inward-looking, anachronistic organisation, the domestic game is set up in such a way that makes it all but impossible for even the biggest clubs to compete on a global basis. A progressive consensus is now forming, outside the corridors of power, on the need for change. And while there have been the first signs of restlessness from the clubs, we are still a long way away from the prospect of them getting together to organise a league on a more rational basis.

That said, at least there is one good thing to say about the 2016 championship in that it will be a little bit more of a national affair than last year's version. Just eight of the country's 27 states are represented in the first division, but last year there was only one team from the north east, a region that staged half the 2013 Confederations Cup and a third of the following year's World Cup.

Sport of Recife were on their own last time out, and enjoyed one of their best seasons, finishing a solid sixth. They are now joined in the top flight by neighbour

Holders...Corinthians coach Tite and winger Lucca

Warm-up... Internacional's Rever challenges Diego Souza of Fluminense

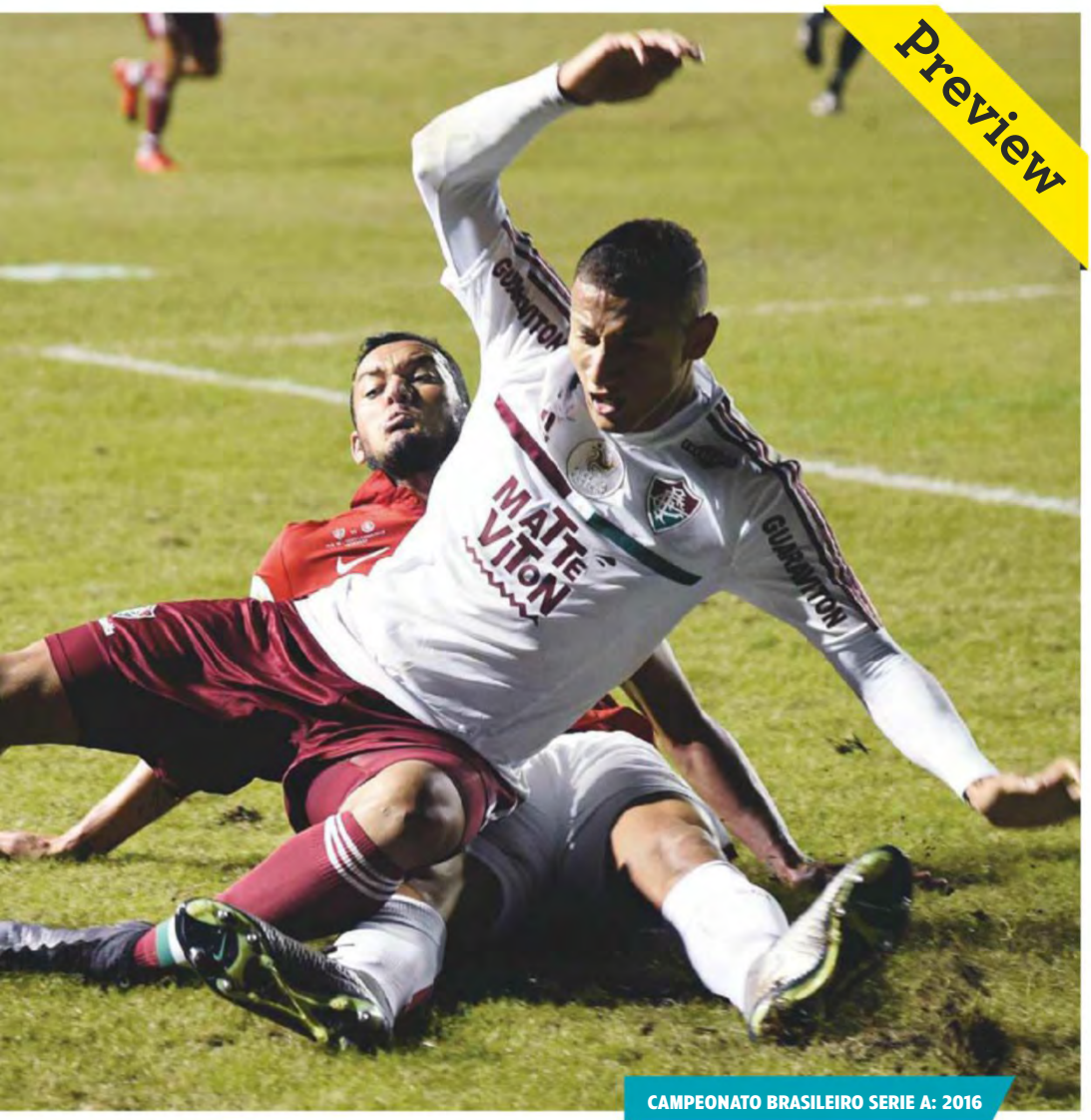
> "It would seem certain that the title will go to one of the 17 clubs based in the south and south-east regions"

Santa Cruz, a team with a huge following which has seldom been able to punch anywhere near its weight on a national level. And also promoted were Vitoria of Salvador, something of a yo-yo club in recent seasons.

This increased north-eastern representation is clearly healthy. But unless Sport, coached by 1982 World Cup hero Falcao, are to pull off a surprise, it would seem certain that the title will go to one of the 17 clubs based in the south and south-east regions.

The leading contenders are clustered in the four major cities of Brazilian football: Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte in the south east, and Porto Alegre in the south. This year, though, there would seem little chance of the Rio clubs bringing an end to a disappointing recent sequence as the 2016 Olympics are proving a problem to the clubs in the host city.

Both major stadiums, the Maracana and Engenhao, have been handed over to the IOC and will only be available to stage league games in the closing few weeks. The Rio clubs, then, would seem condemned to a nomadic existence. Newly-promoted Botafogo may well use the stadium of just relegated Vasco da Gama, cutting out the travel worries, but Botafogo are a cut-price outfit who will be happy with mid-table survival. Fluminense have been chewing their way through coaches and hope that the experienced Levir Culpi can arrest a worrying slide that nearly left them in danger



last year. And Flamengo under Muricy Ramalho may be interesting, but still look like half a side with half an idea.

There are problems, too in Sao Paulo. Reigning champions Corinthians had the heart cut out of their side by an exodus to China in January. Coach Tite has done a fine rebuilding job, but he might be lost to the national team before long.

Both Sao Paulo and Palmeiras, meanwhile, have made poor starts to the year. The former are coached by Edgardo Bauza, an Argentinian who has yet to find his feet, while the latter have an over-sized squad full of too many similar options. Santos, from the nearby port city, have an attractive team and could be contenders, but they are likely to suffer from Olympic call-ups and the loss of key players in the transfer window.

In Porto Alegre, Gremio often have possession without punch, while Internacional have been caught of late in a spiral of under-performance. The early focus, then, might be on the Belo Horizonte pair. Cruzeiro seem to have assembled an interesting squad, though coach Deivid's lack of experience is a risk. Atletico Mineiro, meanwhile, were runners-up last year and under Diego Aguirre they have added intelligent re-enforcements while adding more control to a style that could be over-frenetic.

Conciliating a domestic campaign with the Libertadores will not be easy, but Atletico have high hopes of a first league title since the inaugural version back in 1971. WS

CAMPEONATO BRASILEIRO SERIE A: 2016

1 America (Belo Horizonte)
Atletico Mineiro
Cruzeiro
2 Atletico Paranaense (Curitiba)
Coritiba
3 Botafogo (Rio)
Flamengo
Fluminense
4 Chapecoense (Chapeco)
5 Corinthians (Sao Paulo)
Palmeiras
Santos
Sao Paulo
6 Figueirense (Florianopolis)
7 Gremio (Porto Alegre)
Internacional
8 Ponte Preta (Campinas)
9 Santa Cruz (Recife)
Sport
10 Vitoria (Salvador)

KEY DATES
Season starts: May 13, 2016
Season ends: December 3, 2016

league goals this season as Benfica beat Braga 5-1.

VENEZUELA: Bottom of the South American World Cup qualifying table, Venezuela appoint 43-year-old former goalkeeper Rafael Dudamel as national coach.

Saturday April 2

ECUADOR: Uruguayan coach Alvaro Gutierrez takes over at LDU Quito following the resignation of Argentinian boss Claudio Borghi.

HUNGARY: Although they lose 2-1 to Debrecen, Ferencvaros are crowned league champions as closest challengers MTK are beaten 4-1 at Paksi.

SPAIN: Real Madrid end Barcelona's run of 39 games unbeaten in all competitions with a 2-1 victory at Camp Nou.

Sunday April 3

ALGERIA: Christian Gourcuff stands down as national coach, two years before his contract is due to end, with the side top of their African Nations Cup qualifying group.

GERMANY: Hanover dismiss Thomas Schaaf after the previous day's 3-0 home defeat by Hamburg.

ITALY: Lazio sack coach Stefano Pioli after they lose 4-1 at home to Roma in the *Derby Della Capitale* on Saturday. Simone Inzaghi takes charge for the remainder of the season. Former national boss Cesare Maldini passes away, aged 84.

Monday April 4

BRAZIL: Sao Paulo police ban away fans from all city derbies until the end of the year after a bystander was shot dead as Palmeiras and Corinthians followers clashed before Sunday's state championship game, which Palmeiras won 1-0.

ENGLAND: Chelsea announce that Italy coach Antonio Conte will join the club as their new manager, on a three-year contract, after Euro 2016.

HOLLAND: Twente are docked three points by the Royal Dutch Football Association (KNVB) after a fourth failure to get their finances in order.

Tuesday April 5

GREECE: AEK Athens and Atromitos are both deducted three points and ordered to play two matches behind closed doors for the crowd trouble that followed Atromitos' 1-0 win in February. Both clubs say they will appeal the decision.

MEXICO: Andre-Pierre Gignac scores twice to give Tigres a 2-0 victory over Queretaro and a place in the CONCACAF Champions League Final against America, ➤

World cup qualifiers

JOHN DUERDEN

China edge into the final stage

Second place takes them through

Opener...China's Huang Bowen celebrates his goal against Qatar

Three hours before China's crucial 2018 World Cup qualifier with Qatar and thousands of fans were milling around outside Shaanxi Stadium in Xian, the country's ancient capital. Everyone knew the score, from those buying counterfeit red shirts to the masses of army and SWAT guys: nothing less than a win would send the team to the final round – and even that may not be enough.

Asia's system is like this: 40 teams, split into eight groups of five, start the second round. Twelve (the eight group winners and four best runners-up) then progress to the last stage where they compete for the continent's four automatic spots.

Ahead of the final round of games, the eight group winners were as good as sorted, so the focus was on the best second-placed teams.

With China needing to win, and then rely on other teams slipping up, it was a tense situation. The headlines that hundreds of millions of dollars of investment in famous foreign players had not prevented yet another national team failure were waiting to be written. China had fallen before the final stage of qualification every time since 2002 and have had just a sole appearance on the global stage.

Two goalless draws against Hong Kong had left the situation perilous and cost Alain Perrin his job in January. The Frenchman had been replaced by Gao Hongbo, returning to the post for the final two games. The first was a 4-0 win over Maldives and the second was against the already qualified Qatar five days later.

A poor first half was forgotten when Huang Bowen swept home for China from the edge of the area just before the hour. Then, just before the end, as the visitors were just starting to look interested, winger Wu Lei sealed the all-important victory.

It says much for the recent history of China's national side that finishing in second place – above Hong Kong, Maldives and Bhutan – provoked a lap of honour around the stadium from the players. Coach Gao was greeted by a round of applause as he entered the press conference.

China still needed other teams to slip up. One of those was Jordan, under Harry Redknapp, but their hopes ended with a 5-1 loss to Australia in Sydney. The appointment of the Englishman on a two-game deal surprised many and did seem a bit of a waste of time when there are plenty of local coaches with plenty more domestic knowledge.

Out...Jordan (in white) lost to Australia

North Korea were the other team that slipped up to allow China through, and their defeat was far more unexpected. The Philippines, led by former USA international Thomas Dooley, had only ever won one World Cup qualifier in their history, but they picked up two wins from their first two games and also went to Pyongyang for a creditable 0-0 draw.

The Azkals, as The Philippines are known, have been busy strengthening their ranks by adding "Fil-foreigns" – players born overseas (usually Europe) with a Filipino

VENEZUELA FIRE SANVICENTE, DUNGA UNDER PRESSURE

Noel Sanvicente was fired as Venezuela coach after his side lost 4-1 at home to Chile. The result left Venezuela rooted to the bottom of the qualifying table and former international goalkeeper Rafael Dudamel takes his place.

After the latest round of matches, the pressure mounted on Brazil coach Dunga, whose side are down in sixth position after 2-2 draws at home to Uruguay and away to Paraguay.

While Dunga can find no place in his squad for former captain Thiago Silva, he has stuck by David Luiz – a decision that looked indefensible in the light of the performance against Uruguay, where Luiz was a defensive liability.

Adding to the coach's problems, there are also rumours of a strained relationship with his captain, Neymar.

Tim Vickery

Dismissed...Noel Sanvicente

parent – to their squad. However, their good start was followed by three defeats before the final home game against the North Koreans.

The visitors took a 2-1 lead just before the break, but two late goals from German-born Manny Ott and Australian-born Iain Ramsey denied North Korean dreams of a third finals tournament.

Going into the final round of games, Syria were the best second-placed team but they faced a tough trip to Japan and lost 5-0, with Shinji Kagawa scoring twice. Fortunately for Syria, North Korea and Jordan losing meant their spot in the final stage was secure.

With China and Syria through, that left Iraq and United Arab Emirates to complete the dozen. Iraq had surprisingly missed out on top spot in their group to a young and talented Thai team. That left the 2007 Asian champions needing a 1-0 win against Vietnam at their temporary home of Tehran to make it to the next stage.

UAE, meanwhile, got the draw they needed at home to rivals Saudi Arabia. The visitors to Abu Dhabi, who had already secured their passage, took the lead early on, with Mohammad Al Sahlawi getting his 14th goal of qualification so far. In the second half however, Omar Abdulrahman, one of Asia's biggest talents, equalised and UAE were safely in the last stage.

UAE may well agree with the sentiments of China's Gao Hongbo when, asked after the game with Qatar whether he would be in charge for the final round that kicks off later this year, commented: "Let's just enjoy this for now. There is still a lot of hard work to be done, but that will come later." WS

who beat Santos Laguna 1-0.

QATAR: With a 0-0 draw against Nasaf of Uzbekistan, El Jaish become the first side to qualify for the last 16 of the AFC Champions League.

SPAIN: Fernando Torres opens the scoring but is later sent off as Atletico Madrid lose 2-1 at Barcelona in the first leg of the Champions League quarter-finals.

Wednesday April 6

ENGLAND: Joe Hart saves a Zlatan Ibrahimovic penalty as Manchester City draw 2-2 at Paris Saint-Germain in the Champions League.

TOGO: Claude Le Roy, who has led teams at a record eight African Cup finals, is appointed national coach of Togo on a three-year contract.

Thursday April 7

SPAIN: Without an away win in La Liga or continental competition all season, holders Sevilla triumph 2-1 at Athletic Bilbao in the first leg of their Europa League quarter-final.

SWEDEN: The Swedish Football Association announce Norrkoping's Janne Andersson will succeed Erik Hamren as national coach after this summer's Euro finals.

Friday April 8

EURO U17s: France are drawn in a group with their predecessors as winners, England, while hosts Azerbaijan face Portugal, Belgium and Scotland in the tournament finals to be held from May 5 to 21.

UGANDA: Despite the country's president Yoweri Museveni giving cash-strapped Villa €105,000 so they could travel to Morocco for the first leg of their CAF Confederation Cup last-16 tie, last year's Ugandan Cup winners are beaten 7-0 by FUS Rabat – the biggest victory in the competition this season.

Saturday April 9

AUSTRALIA: Melbourne Victory's 0-0 draw with Brisbane Roar sees Adelaide United claim the A-League Premiers' Plate title.

DR CONGO: Defending champions TP Mazembe are beaten 2-0 by Wydad of Morocco in the away leg of their CAF Champions League qualifier.

RUSSIA: CSKA thrash bottom-of-the-league Mordovia Saransk 7-1 to go top of the table, a point clear of Rostov, who could only draw 0-0 with Anzhi the previous day.

SPAIN: Cristiano Ronaldo scores in Real Madrid's 4-0 victory over Eibar to become the first player to manage 30 goals in six successive Spanish top-flight seasons. La Liga leaders Barcelona lose 1-0 at Real Sociedad.

WALES: The New Saints beat Bala Town 2-0 and win the Welsh Premier League for a fifth successive season – and for a 10th time in total.

Sunday April 10

ECUADOR: Barcelona stay in first place as the top two meet, beating Independiente 3-2.

GERMANY: Borussia Dortmund draw 2-2 at Schalke in the Ruhr derby.

ITALY: Palermo's game against Lazio is halted twice because of crowd trouble as the visitors win 3-0.

Monday April 11

FIFA: Former FIFA vice-president Alfredo Hawit of Honduras pleads guilty to racketeering and corruption charges relating to the awarding of contracts for media and marketing rights to CONCACAF tournaments and World Cup matches.

GERMANY: Jens Keller, who twice led Schalke into the Champions League, will take charge of second-tier side Union Berlin next season.

ITALY: Palermo president Maurizio Zamparini makes the relegation-battling side's eighth coaching change of the season, dismissing Walter Novellino after just three weeks in charge.

NIGERIA: Security forces occupy the Nigerian Football Federation offices in Abjua following last week's court ruling that NFF president Amaju Pinnick lost to Chris Giwa in September 2014 elections.

Tuesday April 12

ENGLAND: Manchester City reach the last four of the European Cup/Champions League for the first time, beating Paris Saint-Germain 1-0 for a 3-2 aggregate victory.

ITALY: Youth-team boss and former midfielder Cristian Brocchi will take charge of Milan until the end of the season following the sacking of coach Sinisa Mihajlovic.

SPAIN: Real Madrid overturn a 2-0 first-leg loss to beat Wolfsburg 3-2 and claim a place in the Champions League semi-finals for a sixth successive season. Pedro De Felipe, who won the European Cup with Real Madrid in 1966, passes away, at the age of 71. Getafe appoint Juan Esnaider as coach until the end of the season after they fired Fran Escriba on Monday.

WORLD CUP: Australia are drawn with Japan, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Iraq and Thailand in Group B of the third round of Asian qualifiers, while Group A sees Iran paired with South Korea, Uzbekistan, China, Qatar and Syria. WS

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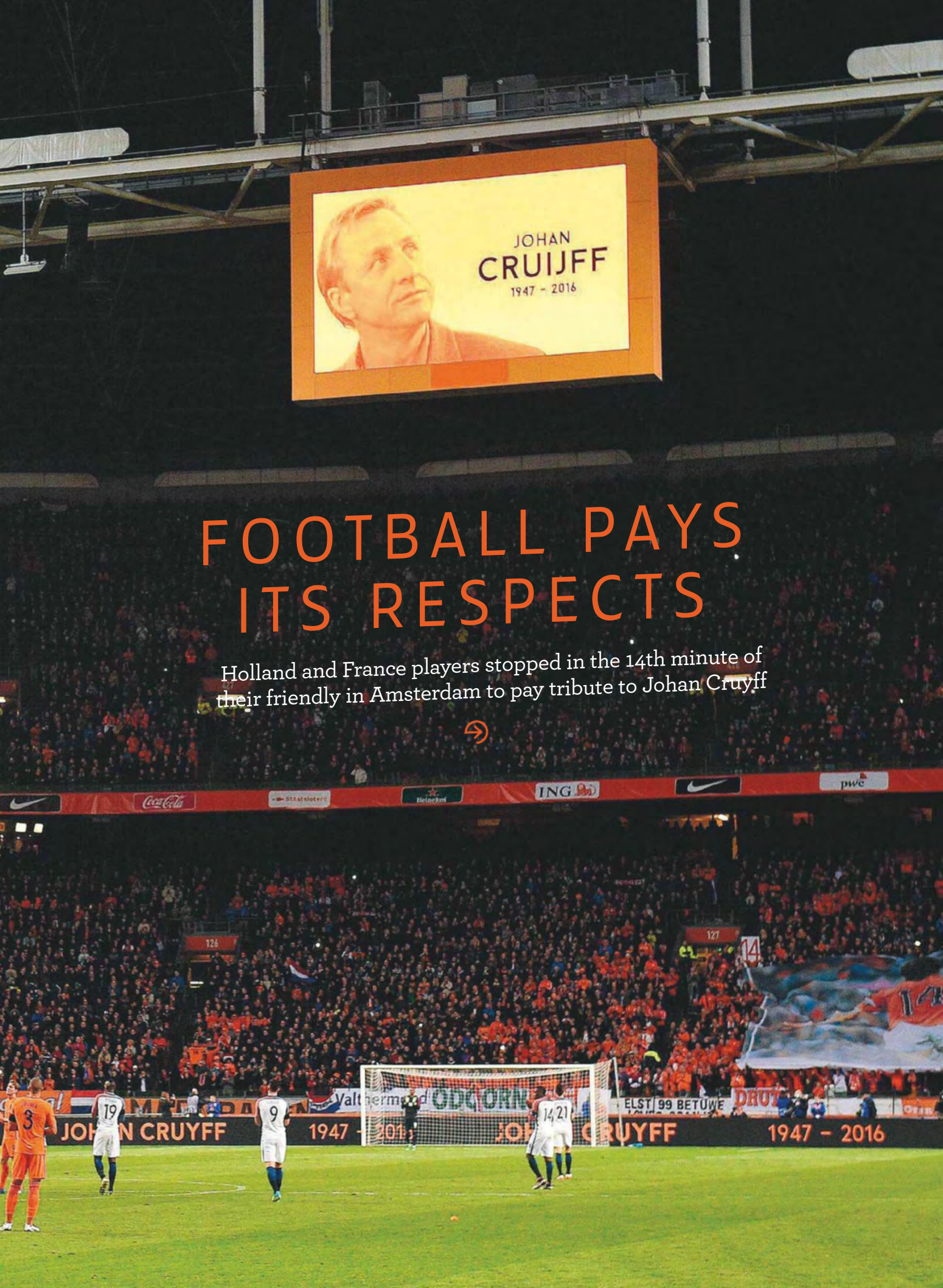
JOHAN CRUYFF
1947 - 2016



FOOTBALL PAYS ITS RESPECTS

Holland and France players stopped in the 14th minute of their friendly in Amsterdam to pay tribute to Johan Cruyff

FOOTBALL REVOLUTIONARY

Johan Cruyff was one of the most significant figures in the history of the game, both as a player and as a coach. Keir Radnedge pays tribute

Johan Cruyff was one of the greatest footballers and then most innovative coaches in the history of the game. He died of lung cancer in Barcelona, in March, aged 68, having been diagnosed last October.

Cruyff inspired Ajax to victory in three successive European Champions Cups in the early 1970s, led Holland to the 1974 World Cup Final and epitomised the revolutionary "Total Football" concept. In the pantheon of the game, he stands right up among such as Pele, Alfredo Di Stefano, Ferenc Puskas and Diego Maradona.

Yet initially he owed his first steps to the persistence of his mother. A cleaner in the Ajax offices, she persuaded the Amsterdam club's coaching staff to take her son into their youth section when he was 12.

The rest is history, with a virtually unbroken 25-year succession of trophies and awards, first as a player and then a coach.

Cruyff made his first-team debut at 17, his goalscoring international debut at 19 and went on to inspire Ajax and Holland through most of their golden 1970s.

"Total football" was a concept of the game first described as "The Whirl" in the early 1950s by the Austrian expert Willy Meisl. He saw the day when every player in a team would possess comparable technical and physical ability and would be able to interchange roles at will.

Cruyff was "The Whirl" in action. Nominally he played centre-forward, but his perception of the role was as unorthodox as the squad number 14 he wore on his back for most of his career with Ajax. He did turn up at the apex of the attack, but he was also to be found meandering through midfield and out on the wings, using his nimble, coltish pace to unhinge defences from a variety of angles and positions.

Single-handed, he pulled Internazionale apart in the 1972 European Cup Final and scored both goals in Ajax's 2-0 win. The next year, in Belgrade, he inspired one of the greatest 20-minute spells of football ever seen as the Dutch side overcame another strong Italian outfit, Juventus.

Already the vultures were gathering. Spain had reopened its borders to foreign players and Cruyff was an obvious target.

Eventually Barcelona won the race for his signature – but only after the close of the league's autumn deadline. However, such was the magnitude of the transfer that the Spanish federation bent their own regulations so that Cruyff could play immediately.

When Cruyff arrived in Barcelona, the team were struggling down the table. By the season's end they were champions, Cruyff's triumphant progress having included a spectacular 5-0 victory away to arch-rivals Real Madrid.

Surprisingly, apart from that league title, Barcelona won little else, though Cruyff completed the first ever hat-trick of European Footballer of the Year awards.

It was at the end of his first season with Barca that Cruyff's career reached its international zenith. At the 1974 World Cup finals, Holland played their "Total Football" through round after round and no one could live with them.

Above all, no one could handle the mercurial Cruyff, who inspired victories over Uruguay and Bulgaria in the first round, then provided two goals to lead the way against Argentina in the second. The last group match – in effect the semi-final – was against Brazil: the old masters versus the new. Cruyff scored Holland's decisive second goal in a 2-0 victory that was to signal a new era.

However, the Final ended in defeat at the hands of West Germany and, though Holland reached the Final again in 1978, by then Cruyff had retired from the national team and was about to head west.

First he joined the Los Angeles Aztecs in the NASL. He won the Most Valuable Player award that year, moved to the Washington Diplomats in 1980 and, late in 1981, returned to Holland to win the Championship twice more with Ajax and once, mischievously, with their bitter rivals Feyenoord.

Cruyff's move into management, typically, aroused new controversy as he had never obtained the necessary qualifications. Not that it mattered.

He guided Ajax to the European Cup-winners Cup in 1987, and repeated the trick in 1989 after retracing his steps to Barcelona. Here he created the famous "Dream Team" who secured the club's first Champions Cup in 1992 – by 1-0 against Sampdoria at Wembley – as well as four consecutive league titles during his record seven years in charge. WS

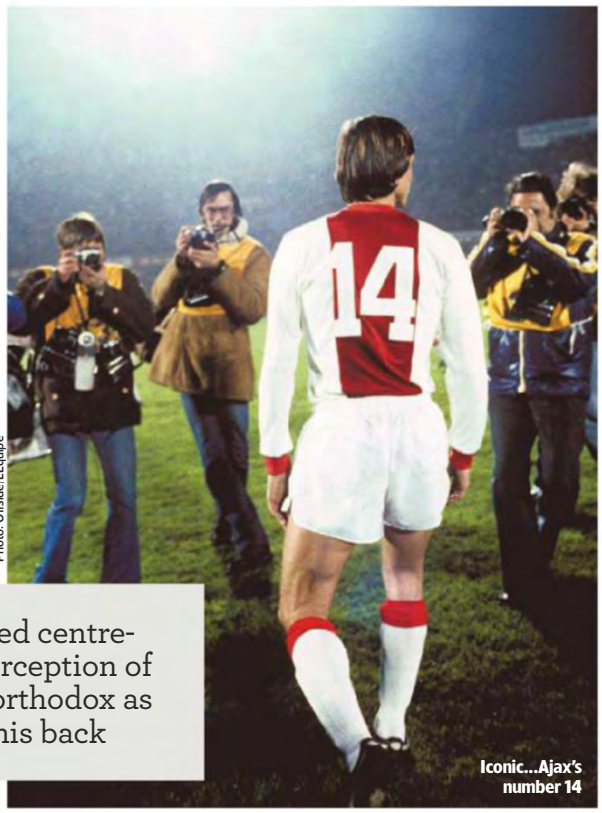


Photo: Offside/L'Equipe

Iconic...Ajax's number 14

> Nominally he played centre-forward, but his perception of the role was as unorthodox as the number 14 on his back

CRUYFF IN NUMBERS

521 club league appearances

291 goals

48 caps

33 goals

10 league titles

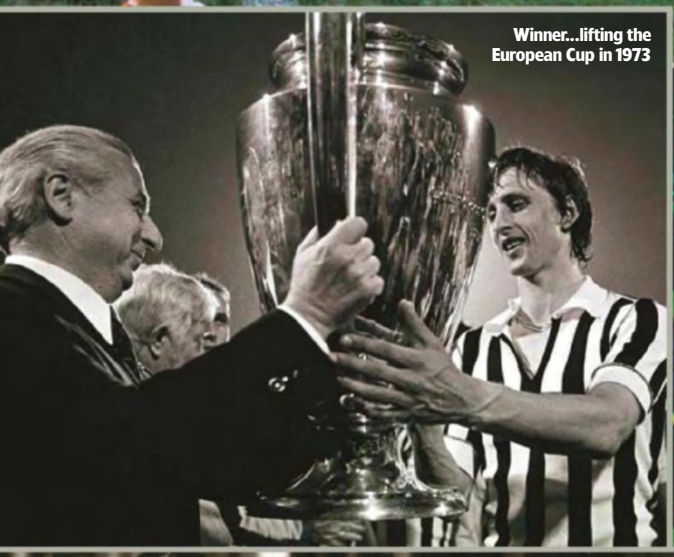
7 cups

3 European Champions Cups

3 European Footballer of the Year awards

Relaxed...cards and a cigarette with Ajax team-mates in 1972

Go west...taking to the pitch with Washington Diplomats



Winner...lifting the European Cup in 1973

First...Barcelona are champions of Europe at last

In charge...on the Barca bench

ONE OF THE GREATS

Cruyff was the third-greatest player of all time, after Pele and Di Stefano, says Brian Glanville

Johan Cruyff once told me that he was not especially fast, he simply got off the mark quicker than his opponents. If they did manage to block him, he could leave them standing with the extraordinary so-called "Cruyff Turn", whereby he feinted to cross the ball but dragged it back behind his standing leg with the other foot, turning a half circle and leaving his opponent stranded.

The wonder of it was that for all his supreme achievements, three times European Footballer of the Year, thrice in a row winner with Ajax of the European Cup, he was never a World Cup winner. He should have been so in 1974 in West Germany, when his Dutch team was the most impressive of all.

I shall never forget the goal that he and his formidable foil Johan Neeskens created against a bruising Brazilian team under the rain in Dortmund in the final group match. Haring up the right flank – though much of his best work was done on the left – Cruyff sent the powerful midfielder Neeskens through the middle, received the ball from him, then crossed it perfectly for Neeskens to drive it home.

> I'm convinced Holland would have beaten the hosts in the 1978 World Cup Final were Cruyff to have played

They and their ultimate conquerors, the West Germans, were playing what came to be called "Total Football", the bold ethos of which was that anybody could do anything. Arguably though, the first "Total Footballer" was Alfredo Di Stefano. Much admired by Cruyff himself, Di Stefano was capable of covering the whole field with the Real Madrid team he inspired to win the first five European Cups.

The other role model for Cruyff was a fellow Dutchman, Faas Wilkes, a tall slim inside-forward who figured in the Rest of Europe team beaten by Great Britain at Hampden Park in 1947, and was highly successful when he joined Inter in Milan.

Cruyff, as we know, came from humble origins, his father dying young, his mother cleaning the Ajax club offices, until one day she asked if her young boy could be taken on by the club. He was, and with swift and consistent success.

Ajax were what you might call a nurturing club. They looked after aspiring players off the pitch as well as on it. Cruyff himself was a rapid and remarkable learner. I shan't forget attending a press reception held by the Dutch in their Hiltrup base during the 1974 World Cup. Surrounded by a polyglot of journalists he dealt effortlessly with them in Dutch, English, German, Spanish and Italian.

So what went wrong in that 1974 World Cup Final in Munich, which Holland began so majestically? I was among those who marvelled at the way in which Holland began the match, infuriating the whistling German crowd from the kick-off with their possession football, then breaking away to erupt through the opposition defence. Cruyff's dynamic run took him all the way into the penalty area where he was tripped – Neeskens slamming in the penalty.

It should have been the beginning of a profusion of goals, but instead the Dutch seemed content to roll the ball about in pretty patterns. Was this, as some afterwards surmised, deliberately to humiliate the Germans, with memories of the Nazis brutal domination of Holland during the Second World War?

In the event, Germany equalised from a spot-kick and Holland's chance was thrown away when late in the half Cruyff and Johnny Rep broke though a vulnerable defence, left Beckenbauer behind and Cruyff gave Rep what seemed the easiest of chances. But he failed, Sepp Maier the keeper saving at his feet and West Germany went on to win.

Four years later in Argentina I'm convinced that Holland would have beaten the hosts in the Final were Cruyff to have played. Why did he refuse? The most likely, if belated, explanation is that there was a terrifying attempt by armed men to kidnap himself and his family, which kept him at home.

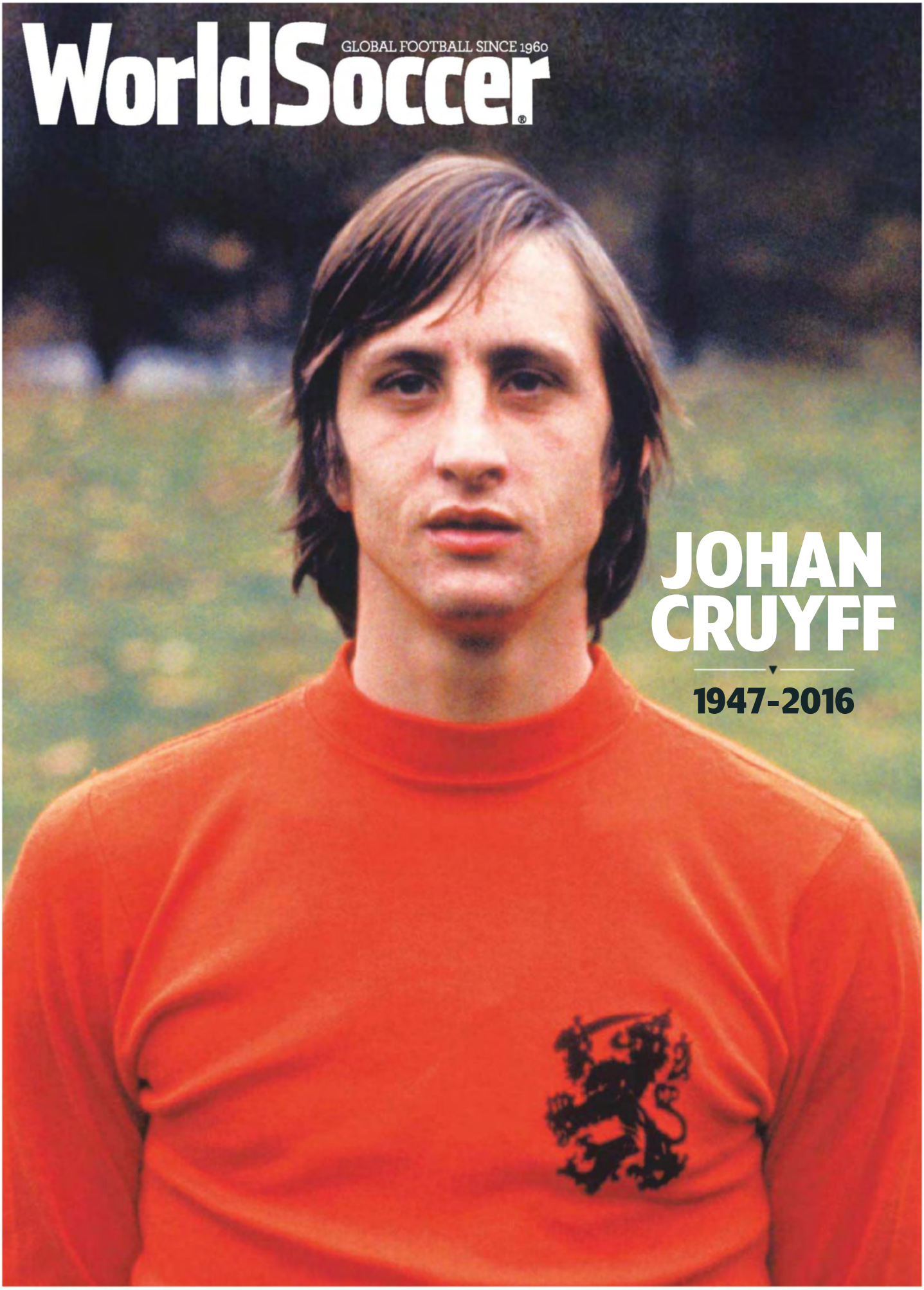
And so to Barcelona, where he would continue to excel, first as player, later as manager. I'd place him third in my list of great players, behind only Di Stefano and the finest of them all, Pele. WS

Penalty...brought down in the 1974 World Cup Final v West Germany

Camp Nou...Barcelona fans pay tribute to one of their own

Unstoppable... celebrating a goal for Barca

Supreme...scoring against Brazil


WorldSoccer
GLOBAL FOOTBALL SINCE 1960
JOHAN CRUYFF
1947-2016